

“As for the Son of the Slave Woman...”

Genesis 21:8-21 • Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17 • Romans 6:1b-11 • Matthew 10:24-39

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Today we are going to consider one of the most problematic stories in the entire Bible: the story of Hagar, the Egyptian slave. Today's story is about slavery and sex, patriarchy and power, race and religion, abandonment and – ultimately – adoration. It is a story about one man, two women, and one God, all of whom make decisions that have lasting repercussions that endure to this day. This story is sacred scripture for both Jews and Christians, and it is also central to the Muslim faith as well. But knowing that doesn't make it easy to read. This is a difficult one. Parental guidance is suggested!

What you need to know before we begin: (1.) God called Abraham to leave Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) and go to the land of Canaan (modern Israel). That took place about four thousand years ago, give or take a few centuries. (2.) Abraham was 75 years old when he made that journey. His wife Sarah was 65. They had no children. She was barren. (3.) God told Abraham that he would have as many descendants as there were stars in the sky. Eventually, God made good on that promise. Twenty-five years after they arrived in Canaan, Sarah finally gave birth to a son, Isaac. But – this is where we begin today – fifteen years *before* the birth of Isaac, after they had been living in Canaan for about a decade, Sarah and Abraham had given up. She wasn't pregnant; she didn't think she ever *would* get pregnant, despite God's promise. So they decided to take matters into their own hands.

There are times in life when God's will seems pretty clear to us. When it's pretty obvious what God wants us to do. There are other times when God seems silent, when we're not getting any clear answers to our prayers, when we feel like we just have to make the best decisions we can, and hope that they are in line with God's will. That, I think, is what happened to Abraham and Sarah. They tried, and they tried, but she was not getting pregnant. They were desperate. They made a decision. Sarah “had an Egyptian slave whose name was Hagar.” Slavery was a fairly common practice in the ancient world. Prisoners of war were sometimes turned into slaves; so were criminals; sometimes people even voluntarily sold themselves into slavery for a period of time so they could pay off a debt. Slaves could be bought and sold, and people could be born into slavery. Abraham apparently had quite a number of slaves; Genesis refers to “all the men in his house, slaves born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner.” Sarah had at least one slave, this Egyptian woman named Hagar. Sarah may have acquired Hagar when they were living in Egypt for a time, during a famine.

Sarah has an idea. A way to solve their problem of being childless. She says to her husband: “You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.” Oh my. There are so many issues here. Abraham is powerful; Hager is just a slave. He is 85 years old; she must have been of childbearing age, probably *at least* sixty years younger than he is, maybe even still in her teens. He's from Mesopotamia; she's from Egypt, so she probably

had darker skin than he did. They may not have conceptualized “race” the way we do now, but they certainly had national prejudices. And this plot is being hatched without Hagar being given *any say* in the matter. But Abraham raises *no concerns*. “Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife.” This was an arranged marriage. It wasn’t prostitution – Hagar didn’t get *paid* for this – nor was it adultery – she became his wife. But not a wife of equal status. She still remained Sarah’s slave – forced to marry, forced into a sexual relationship with a *much* older man, forced to become pregnant, forced to carry and bear his child, whether she wanted to or not. And if something were to go wrong, if she were to die in childbirth – well, too bad. I wonder if – at *any point* along the way – Hagar consented to this plan. “He went in to Hagar, and she conceived.” Sarah’s plan works; Hagar becomes pregnant; Abraham is going to have a child. But ... *at what cost!?!?*

Once Hagar knows she is pregnant, “she looked with contempt on her mistress.” Hagar is apparently feeling a little smug. I can’t say that I blame her, after what she was made to endure. Sarah is offended and runs to Abraham in hot anger. Abraham says to her: “Your slave is in your power; do to her as you please.” Sarah does *exactly* that; “Sarai dealt harshly with her.” What, exactly, did Sarah do? Did she yell at her? Beat her? *Whip* her? The Bible doesn’t say. But it was bad enough that Hagar decided to *run away*. Pregnant and alone in the desert, she is now an *escaped and fugitive slave*.

It is at this point that *God* finally intervenes. “The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness.” The angel says to her: “Hagar, slave of Sarai” – not “Hagar, wife of Abraham” – “where have you come from and where are you going?” Hagar is truthful: “I am running away from my mistress Sarai.” The angel tells her: “Return to your mistress, and submit to her.” Hagar must have been crushed. *God wants me to go back to that horrible woman?* The angel continues: “I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.” Hagar receives a promise like the one that God had given to Abraham. The angel tells Hagar to name her child Ishmael – which means “God hears” – because, as the angel explains, “the Lord has given heed to your affliction.” This is very important. *God gives heed to the affliction of a woman, a foreigner, who has been enslaved, exploited, impregnated, and abused.* God listens to the cries of the people who *aren’t in power*. The ones who aren’t in charge, who aren’t rich or famous; the ones who become unwitting pawns in other people’s chess games. For those of us born into privilege – and especially those of us (like me) who have *no idea* what’s it’s *really* like to be a woman, or a person of color, or a member of *any* group that has been made to feel inferior, or unwanted, or unwelcome – we really need to hear this. *God gives heed to the affliction of the people who aren’t in power.* In her hour of need, *God came to this fugitive slave girl.*

God does tell her to go back. “Return to your mistress, and submit to her.” That doesn’t condone what Sarah had done. But it does mean that God is going to *do something* to redeem this situation. God tells Hagar that her son “will be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him, and he shall live at odds with all his kin.” That’s not exactly a stellar prophecy – surely not what a mom wants to hear! – but at least it gives Hagar something to hold onto. Hagar is deeply moved. “So she named the Lord who spoke to her, ‘You are El-roi’” – which means “God of seeing” or “God who sees” – “for she said, ‘Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?’” She returns to her mistress, gives birth, and raises her son in Abraham’s house.

Many years pass. Sarah eventually – *finally!* – conceives and gives birth to her own son, Isaac. But then “Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac.” Sarah goes rushing to her husband. “Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac!” Sarah is being *so petty*. “The matter was

very distressing to Abraham on account of his son,” Ishmael. But *God* intervenes, a *second* time. “God said to Abraham, ‘Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.’” God has a future in store for *both* of Abraham’s sons. God gives Abraham permission to cast out Hagar – his *wife!* – and Ishmael, his firstborn son. God implies that *they will be okay*. “So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away.” Sarah is nowhere to be seen; she does not come out to say goodbye to her former slave in any way. So Hagar “departed and wandered about in the wilderness.”

But that bread and water only lasts so long. “When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot, for she said, ‘Do not let me look on the death of the child.’ And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept.” She might have prayed like this: “Bow down your ear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and in misery. Keep watch over my life, for I am faithful; save your servant who trusts in you.... Turn to me and have mercy on me; give your strength to your servant, and save the child of your handmaid. Show me a sign of your favor, so that those who hate me may see it and be put to shame....” Those words come from Psalm 86. Hagar didn’t write them, but she could have prayed them; they mirror the situation she was facing. The Psalms are “the prayer book of the Bible.” Anything *you* might be going through ... there are words in the Psalms that match.

God intervenes, for the *third* time in Hagar’s story. “God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, ‘What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.’ Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.” They survive. This abandoned woman, this abused slave, this cast-off wife, who is now a single mother – she and her son *survive*. They survive not because any *human* cared for them – but because *God* cared for them.

And what of Ishmael? “God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow ... and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.” Later, he had twelve sons, and at least one daughter – just like Jacob, the ancestor of all Israel. Those twelve sons of Ishmael became twelve *princes*, governing twelve *tribes*. God did indeed make a great nation out of Ishmael, son of Hagar – a great nation in the Arabian desert, where Saudi Arabia is now. The Ishmaelites are believed to be the ancestors of the Arab peoples, including Muhammad, the great prophet in Islam. So Sarah’s machinations ultimately led to a result that she surely did not expect. Abraham became the ancestor of *two* distinct groups of people, indeed, two distinct *religions*. Sarah’s son Isaac gave rise to the Jews; Hagar’s son Ishmael ultimately gave rise to the Muslims. According to both the Bible and the Quran, *Jews and Muslims are related*. They have not always gotten along well through the centuries; the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict is but one example of that. But the Bible says there was a day when Ishmael and Isaac *wanted to play with each other*, in peace. And when Abraham died, Ishmael came back home. Isaac and Ishmael buried their father, *together*.

And *God* ... God is all over this story, both in the things God *does*, and the things God allows *humans* to do. God took a terrible situation and made *something good* come from it. God inspired *faith* to blossom in an Egyptian slave who had been treated poorly by her mistress. And God forged *two nations* from one flawed but faithful man. Two nations, and two faiths. No ... make that *three*.

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