

The State of Hagar

Genesis 16

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Introduction

Typically, in the Church, we like to emphasize our teachings in Genesis on Creation, Noah, and Abraham. Those three subjects have much material, and are worthy to be discussed, because they are in the Bible and the entire Bible is useful for the instruction, correction, and application to our lives. Nevertheless, the Church tends to ignore the other facets in Genesis, such as the ramifications of Noah after the flood leading into the ramifications of the pre-Abraham narrative. What do these ramifications include? These ramifications lead us to the debate between Christianity and Islam.

Christians refer Abraham as the father of Christianity, and just the same, Muslims claims the same Abraham as the father of Islam. Where did the two split off? The answer lies in the status of Abraham's first son Ishmael. Before Abraham was Abraham, he was Abram, and God promised him a son. Through a series of unfortunate events, Abram received this son not through his wife, but through his wife's top maidservant whom his wife gave him. Seems like a crazy family dynamic, and it only gets worse from there. Sarai's desperation leads to further family strife that drives out her top maidservant, pregnant and emotionally distressed, into a world of chaos and instability.

From this period of abandonment, our lovely Hagar experiences God, and she experiences Him in a big way. It is out of this that she bears a son, Ishmael, who is promised to be the father of a nation great in number: Islam. Muslims view Ishmael as the rightful heir of Abraham's inheritance as father of a great nation, therefore Islam is the correct direction of humanity, and they denounce Isaac as illegitimate. On the contraire, Christianity acknowledges that Abraham later gave the birthright to Isaac, and acknowledges Ishmael as the father of a great nation, not the great nation.

Despite these seemingly severe implications stemming from this circumstance into our day, we need to evaluate the emotional state of Hagar, the often forgotten key player in the global religious-political debacle that has existed ever since. The debate between Christianity and Islam cannot be properly addressed in a single message resulting from the Bible and not the Koran. We can, however, properly address the emotional state of those we speak down to, the emotional state of people who feel lost and forgotten, and the emotional state of those who encounter the almighty God, who sees us in our emotional distress and physical weakness, and provides life for us so that we may live in obedience to Him.

Context

As previously mentioned, as Sarai's chief maidservant, I argue that it is likely that Hagar knew of God's promise to Abram of a son. This is because of the occurrences in Genesis 12-15, and then the ten-year waiting period between the promise and Abram and his ultimately folly of adultery spurred by a nagging wife.

God promised Abram that his descendents would be blessed through him, and reiterated it repeatedly. Yet, when Abram became impatient with Yahweh, he sought after compromising the promise God gave him in order to feed his restless, and sinful desires by means of awarding the birthright to one born in his household. 'I know you've promised an heir, but I'm tired of waiting, and have figured out a way to accomplish Your promise to me myself.'

Abram has this mindset of wanting to accomplish what God has promised through his own means, and God responds to make His promise to Abram even clearer.

[The one born in your household] will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body; he shall be your heir (15:4). Not only does God reiterate His promise to Abram of a descendent, and heir, but declares that the heir will be a son that comes forth from Abram's own body.

Abram's desire to fit God's promise in with his life rather than fit his life in with God's promise led to the ultimate demise of Abram's sexual faithfulness to Sarai, his wife. While not explicitly stated, I argue that it is clear that Abram had communicated to Sarai what God had promised to him, because for ten years she reminded him of how ridiculous the promise was. 'You could die anytime now, yet you are wasting your time with me because I cannot give you children. Have sex with someone in our household so that everybody can be happy.' While scripture does not indicate how often during those ten years Sarai reminded Abram of God's promise to Him, it does state that Abram listened to her arguments for ten years. Abram finally caved after ten years, committed adultery against Sarai (although with her blessing) with Hagar, Sarai's maidservant, and it ultimately comes down to his inability to be patient for God's promise to unfold in the timing that God had intended.

This leads to the occurrences in the discourse of Genesis 16. Like previously stated, the angel of the Lord directed the wandering Hagar back to the authority of Sarai, where she gave birth to Ishmael the son of Abram. After birthing Ishmael and returning to the authority of Sarai, God spoke to Abram effectively changing his name to Abraham, and Sarai to Sarah. While not explicit, I am led to believe this was again to comfort Hagar, as a reassurance that her authority is not what she used to be, but of something new and restored. Then God tells Abraham that He will open up Sarah's

womb so she could bear Abraham his promised son, which caused both Abraham and Sarah to laugh because to both of them, the concept of an old man like him and an old lady like her giving birth naturally was quite ridiculous—but the folly with that logic, is that the very fact that God opened up a barren womb is not natural to begin with, but supernatural, so it would not be out of the question for that same God to use that supernatural act for a supernatural purpose.

The Book of Genesis is filled with major characters that experience Yahweh, yet this story in Genesis 16 offers a different story, a story that demonstrates that God cares about all of His creation, not just the major patriarchs. The doctrinal implications key to this passage that will be expounded more thoroughly soon, are that God sees those who are weak, those who are emotionally distressed, those who are servants in their suffering. Furthermore, we are given in 16:13 another glimpse at what it is like to have a divinely appointed experience with a member of the heavenly host: *...Have I even remained alive here after seeing Him?* Hagar had a real world experience with the incredible glory of God, after which she questioned whether she was even still alive.

Expository Summary

It is important to understand the household dynamics presented in this text. We have Abram, the husband and lord of the household, along with his wife Sarai, who has borne him no children because she is unable to birth children. While in likelihood they had other servants and maids, only one is presented in this text, and her name is Hagar, who is one of Sarai's closest maidservants and who is able to bear children.

As Abram's wife, Sarai is likely facing incredible emotional difficulties knowing that she cannot provide for her husband any offspring to carry on his legacy. Sarai blames this tragedy in her life on God, who has closed up her womb. In an attempt to ease the marital tensions, Sarai gives Abram permission to have sex with her top maid, Hagar, so that he may at least have descendants. After ten years of pressuring, Abram finally has sex with Hagar, taking her as his second wife, and ultimately Hagar conceives a child, which escalates the tension within the Abram household than it does deescalate. Sarai cannot stand to look at Hagar. *How could Hagar sleep with her husband? Doesn't Hagar know that Abram is Sarai's husband, not hers?*

In her anger, Sarai seeks to punish Hagar for doing exactly what Sarai gave permission to occur. Sarai goes to the counsel of her husband, and Abram advises her to do as she sees appropriate, because after all, Hagar belongs to Sarai. Sarai used her freedom to punish Hagar harshly; out of anger, Sarai punished her maidservant, and because of Sarai's angry and harsh treatment of her maidservant, her maidservant fled the scene, away from the household, likely with any of her already low amount of belongings.

Hagar wanders 170 miles, assuming her wandering was a straight-line path from Bethel and Ai to the Wilderness of Shur; since it is very likely that she did not wander in a straight line, it is fair to say that she walked hundreds of miles. Not sure what she was looking for or where she was going, it is safe to say that Hagar was an emotional wreck. As she finds herself in the Wilderness of Shur, likely expected death to be near, she has an experience with God that shifts her perspective on who she was and who God is.

An angel of the Lord comes to meet her and speak to her. The text states that the angel *found* Hagar, further affirming the assertion that she was lost, and the angel speaks to her. “Where are you coming from,” he asks her, “and where are you going?” Hagar exclaims that it is her mistress Sarai from whom she comes, and from whom she is fleeing because of the harsh treatment given to her for doing exactly what she allowed in the first place.

The angel, however, does not rebuke, but comforts Hagar. The angel announces that the child Hagar bears is a son who will be the father of a nation great in number. Although the nation will be at odds with everyone, the nation will be great in number. This son is to be named Ishmael because God has seen and not ignored the affliction done to Hagar, and her response to these proclamations and promises from the angel affirm that the angel was there to comfort her, not rebuke her. “God is a God who sees and provides for His people,” she exclaims! It is from this experience that the angel counseled her to return to her master Sarai, to seek repentance from her, and to obey her commandments. Sarai is a sinful master, but when Hagar submits to the authority of her earthly master, she honors the Master who saw her pain, and loved her.

Theology

Most notably, the theological contribution made in Genesis 16 is made of Hagar following her experience with God in verse 13: “You are a God who sees,” related back to the assertion by the Angel of the Lord in verse 11: “the Lord has seen your affliction.” As has already been argued in previous discourses on this passage, Hagar was most undoubtedly living in one of the worse possible situations emotionally that she had likely

experienced in all her life. Run out of her household, and the stability and protection it provided her, and wandering for hundreds of miles into the wilderness, the angel of the Lord assured Hagar that she had not run out of God's sight, and God had not left her.

It was not enough for the angel of the Lord to announce that God sees the emotional distress and physical weaknesses we go through, but the acknowledgement of that intimate connection between God and His People *by Hagar* is what makes this point so crucial. So often we read God's word, and it is meant to comfort us, yet sometimes we struggle to experience what it tells us to experience; it is when we acknowledge the experiences that the Bible says we ought to experience where the true blessing comes into play in our lives.

The Angel of the Lord is Jesus; however, He was not in the form of an angel, because no angel is the Son of God (Heb. 1:5), but rather from the point of view of the receiver of the message He appeared to be like an Angel from the Lord. There are several examples of the usage of the Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament, three in particular used by the same biblical author, Moses, implying the same usage. First, in the passage in discourse, the Angel speaks in first person on behalf of God: "the angel of the Lord said to her, 'I will greatly multiply your descendants...'" (10-11a). Later in Genesis 22:11-15, Abraham has an experience with the angel of the Lord who references God in the first person from heaven having the authority to provide on the same level as God. It is in the burning bush that Moses experienced God, but the angel of the Lord is who appeared to him through the bush; God also called to Moses through the bush as well.

The Angel of the Lord and God are apparently equated, if not specified with a name such as in the New Testament. After Jesus revealed Himself to the world, there is no reference to an Angel of the Lord in the same manner in which an angel of the Lord is referenced prior. Most notably is the angel of the Lord in Matthew 1 speaking to Joseph, whom we learn elsewhere is Gabriel who spoke to Mary as well. While the Bible is not explicit about the status of the angel of the Lord, there are plausible arguments for Jesus pre-incarnate working as the angel of the Lord.

If the implications of Jesus as the Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament are true, then Jesus' ministry as a comforter began far before His on-earth ministry. If, on the other hand, the angel of the Lord who identified himself as Gabriel is the same angel in all situations, then the shift goes from Jesus to God, which is hardly a shift at all, since Jesus is God. This text finally offers another example of God as a promise keeper. Not only did He keep His promise to Abram in Genesis 15 that he would bear a son, the son God gave Him, albeit through Hagar, was promised to be father of a great nation. Ishmael has gone on to become the father of the Middle East nation, who going along with the promise made to Hagar is a nation against everyone, and is a nation whom everyone is against. "Great nation" is not referring to great in stature, but in number, and God certainly kept His promise, and in no means faltered.

Principles and Application

Do not waste your wilderness. All individuals face wilderness periods in their life, some face them more frequently than others. This text shows us that we should not waste our wilderness periods, because it is during these wilderness periods of life, when

we face unbearable emotional distress or physical weakness that our dependency on God is higher than it has ever been. It is in these times that God's messages to us are most clear. It is very likely that throughout the hundreds of miles of wandering Hagar was being told by God to return, but it was when she was at her weakest that those messages were no longer diluted by the messages of the prideful self. She could finally hear what God was trying to communicate to her all along: I see you and want to bless you if you obey me!

Desperate leaders do not make wise decisions, and there are consequences. Sarai, in her desperation was willing to compromise her husband's marital fidelity, and the sexual integrity of their marriage, but subjecting her husband to her maidservant, who had no other reasonable choice but to go along with it. The consequences to Sarai's poor usage of her authority included further marital distress between her and Abram, and the loss of one of her best maidservants, one so obedient that she would have sex, with the purpose of conception, with her master's husband. If hard-pressed deadlines cause a leader to respond in desperation, decisions should not be made alone, and should be made after consulting at least another person, to avoid inappropriate, compromising actions by the authority person or those subjected to his or her authority.

Punishing someone while angry beyond what is appropriate is never ok. As this point relates to us, a parent who spans their child while infuriated is always going to spank harder than is necessary. A parent who spans needs to spank intentionally so that it may be a means to correct their child, not abuse them. This also gives the authority figure time to evaluate the situation, to realize that perhaps they brought on the

alleged wrongdoing. On the other hand, if after evaluation, the authority figure recognizes that wrongdoing has occurred, time also gives them an opportunity to evaluate the proper punishment.

Outline

- I. Household Dynamics
 - a. The Household
 - i. Sarai indicated as Abram's wife (1)
 1. Sarai indicated as baron (1)
 - ii. Abram indicated as Sarai's husband (1)
 - iii. Hagar indicates as the maid-servant of Sarai (1)
 - b. The Compromise
 - i. Sarai declares the Lord has prevented her from bearing children (2)
 1. Sarai gives Abram permission to Abram to have sex with Hagar (2)
 - a. Sarai's hope was that a child would exist in the household from the line of Abram (2)
 - ii. After ten years, Abram has sex with Hagar (3)
 1. Hagar gets pregnant (4)
 - a. Hagar's pregnancy causes Sarai to despise Hagar (4)
 - c. The Discipline
 - i. Sarai seeks her husband's counsel on how to deal with Hagar (5)
 - ii. Abram counsels Sarai to punish Hagar accordingly since Hagar is the servant of Sarai (6)
 1. Sarai used her freedom to punish to treat Hagar harshly (6)
 - a. Hagar fled from the household (6)
- II. Experiencing God
 - a. Hagar wandered into the Wilderness of Shur (7)
 - i. Hagar was near some water (7)
 1. An Angel of the Lord found Hagar, implying she was lost (7)
 - b. The Angel questions and commands Hagar with the purpose of bringing Hagar into a new perspective (8)
 - i. Where are you from? (8)
 1. Hagar's mistress Sarai (8)
 - ii. Where are you going? (8)
 1. Away from Sarai (8)
- III. The Promise
 - a. Return to Sarai and obey Sarai (9)
 - i. The angel promises to greatly multiply her descendents (10)
 - b. Name your son Ishmael, because the Lord has given heed to your affliction (11)
 - i. He will be against everyone (12)
 - ii. Everyone will be against him (12)
 - c. Hagar's response (13)
 - i. Yahweh is a God who sees (13)
 - ii. Yahweh providentially provides for His people (13)

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