

GOD'S COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

Genesis 16:1-16

Sarai and Hagar

In this chapter, Abram becomes submissive to the will of his wife Sarai. She recognizes God's great promises to her husband, as well as the Lord's control over childbearing. Despite divine prophecy that Abram's descendants would be as countless as the stars, God had not yet opened her womb.



After the Lord's covenant with Abram, Sarai sees how to fulfill the prophecy and build her house. Having an Egyptian maid named Hagar, evidently of childbearing age, Sarai decides she could be a surrogate mother. In ancient times slaves were often used to bear children for childless wives. Hagar may have been one of Pharaoh's gifts as mentioned in Chapter 12. In any case, as a slave she is subject to Sarai's wishes.

Abram also obeys Sarai, who gives away the bride: "*Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife.*" The account of the fall in Genesis 3:6 tells us that Eve 'took' and 'gave' to her husband, corresponding closely with this passage. Sarai's plan is seemingly justified when Hagar conceives the long-awaited child. However, the expectant bride's attitude towards Sarai changes, and a predictable conflict arises between the mistress, her slave and Abram.

Sarai's angry rebuke of her husband ("*May the LORD judge between you and me*") is almost a curse. In a futile attempt to placate his wife, Abram offers a reminder that Hagar is under her authority. The mistress reacts by abusing her pregnant slave so badly that Hagar, whose name means 'fugitive', runs away. The term for abuse is identical to that which describes affliction of the Hebrew slaves in Chapter 15.

In the midst of this scene of personal disaster, the Angel of the Lord finds the fugitive slave at a desert well. Carrying the child presumed to be Abram's promised heir, Hagar is alone in the Sinai wilderness somewhere south of Canaan. The Angel addresses her by name ("*Hagar, servant of Sarai*"), asking where she has been and where she is going. Hagar can only answer the first question.

First mentioned in this passage, the pre-incarnate Christ speaks to the lowly slave girl. In words similar those the Apostle delivered to Onesimus, he says, "*Return to your mistress and submit to her.*" This implies that she must endure more suffering and humiliation.

The Angel of the Lord then gives an oracle concerning the unborn child. As promised to Abram, Hagar's children will be countless. Her son will be called *Ishmael*, meaning, 'God has seen my affliction.' Wild and unmanageable, Ishmael will roam apart from men, but always in perpetual conflict with them. Recognizing the divinity of the Angel of the Lord, who addresses her three times, Hagar declares in utter astonishment, "*Have I really looked upon Him here who sees me?*"



Carel Fabritius - Hagar and the Angel

Naming the place, 'The well of the Living One who sees me,' Hagar obediently returns home to bear a son for Abram. Abram then names their child Ishmael. In conclusion of this passage, Hagar and Abram are mentioned, but not Sarai, who seemingly set these events in motion. But the Lord has always been present! The account of Sarai and Hagar demonstrates that, despite our many sins and failures, God's providential economy does not include mistakes. He always sees and cares for us!