

## Introduction

In this series of sermons I am drawing on the experiences of Old Testament personalities in the light of Christian and Rabbinic commentary. Both the Jewish and, to a lesser extent, the Christian communities have lived with these accounts of encounters with God for thousands of years. The spiritual truths that have been gleaned from these accounts by both communities have inspired faith and practice for generations of believers.

## Sarai takes and gives.

- 16:1 Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar;*  
*2 so she said to Abram, "The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her." Abram agreed to what Sarai said.*  
*3 So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife.<sup>1</sup>*

Having lived to old age with her husband Abram, Sarai had been unable to conceive. From the outset the text identifies Sarai as the infertile member of the couple. "*Now Sarai was barren; she had no children.*" (**Gen 11:30**) a fact that Sarai herself acknowledges. "*The LORD has kept me from having children...*" (**Gen 16:2**) Despite the fact that on three separate occasions God promised Abram offspring for ten years they had remained childless. According to the Mishnah<sup>2</sup> (Yevamot 64a (Beraisa) <sup>3</sup>: If a couple did not have children in 10 years, he must divorce her and pay a Kesuvah (an obligation for the husband or his estate to pay the wife a certain amount of money in case he divorces her or dies).

**Gen 12:2** "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

**Gen 13:16** I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted.

**Gen 15:5** And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be."

The humanness of this story is all too familiar. Sarai decides to resolve the situation by human means, even though it meant introducing a rival for her husband's affections. No doubt, Sarai knew the promises Abram had received from God and she shared his desire to see them come to pass. Her act of selflessness is a tribute character. To modern readers what she does may seem strange and even unwise – but at the time the custom of giving a female slave to her husband as a concubine or a wife who would bear children was well established. The ancient law Code of Hammurabi, believed to have been legislated in the time of the patriarchs (18th century B.C.E.), made provision for this practice.

Article 144, of the code of Hammurabi, deals with marriage to a *Naditu* – a priestess who is forbidden to bear children. If a *Naditu* gives her husband her maidservant and thus brings children into the world, the husband is not entitled to marry a *Sagitu* (perhaps a priestess of lesser status).

Article 173 imposes monetary sanctions on a man who divorces a *Sagitu* who has born him children, or a *Naditu* who has enabled him to beget children. These rulings indicate, *inter alia*, that maidservants were used as surrogate mothers for women who themselves could not bear children. Sarai's suggestion may

have stemmed from the fact that Abram's family had come from a region under the rule of Hammurabi and his law code.<sup>4</sup>

Abram's response to Sarai's suggestion has been the subject of rabbinic attention. The Torah is not interested in noting Abram's conformity to contemporary custom. On the contrary, it is concerned with drawing attention to the unique contribution and character of the Patriarch.<sup>5</sup>

The Ramban<sup>6</sup> takes account of all the details mentioned in the text. His observations are made on **Gen 16:2** "Abram listened to Sarai."

*The text does not state that Abram "did so" but that "he listened to Sarai" implying that although Abram deeply longed for children he did not take this step without Sarai's permission. Furthermore, even at this stage he had no intention of being "buildded up" from Hagar and that the issue should be hers. He only intended to carry out the wishes of Sarai to be "buildded up" through her, that she should derive satisfaction from the children of her handmaid, or that she should merit thereby children of her own. Furthermore, it is stated that "Sarai took" implying that Abram did not rush into the matter until Sarai had herself taken Hagar and given her to him. The text also mentions that Sarai "Abrams wife" took Hagar and gave her to Abram her husband "to be his wife" implying that Sarai had not given up hope of having children from Abram and did not keep away from him but they still remained husband and wife. She still wished, however, that Hagar should also have the status of wife and not merely be his concubine. All this underlines Sarai's righteous character and the respect she showed her husband.<sup>7</sup>*

16:4 He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress.

5 Then Sarai said to Abram, "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 the LORD judge between you and me."

6 "Your servant is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.

This is the tragic turning point in the story. Hagar conceives almost immediately and she becomes arrogant about her success. She begins to consider herself superior to her mistress, and favoured by God above her mistress. She disregarded the fact that her new status was due only to Sarai's selfless act of giving her to her husband in the first place, to be his wife and not merely his concubine.

Rashi<sup>8</sup> gives commentary on Genesis 16:4 as follows;

Hagar argued: This Sarai is not what she seems to be. She behaves as if she were a righteous woman when she is not righteous, since she did not merit conception all these years, whilst I became pregnant the first time.

Hagar's mockery had a barb in it. From Sarai's lack of success Hagar drew negative conclusions regarding her ethical conduct and God's favour toward her. Sarai responds by becoming bitter. This humiliation drives her actions though it would seem that there could hardly have been a different outcome under the circumstances.

This predictable outcome may be anticipated in Article 146 of the Code of Hammurabi which stipulates that if the maidservant of a *Naditu* who bore children for the husband of

the priestess seeks on this account to achieve status equal to that of her mistress, the mistress is not entitled to sell her off, but she is entitled to put the mark of servitude on her, denoting her status.<sup>9</sup>

5 Then Sarai said to Abram, "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 the LORD judge between you and me."

Sarai's first response to her humiliation is to blame Abram. You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. This echoes the accusation in **Genesis 3:12**. The man said, "The woman you put here with me--she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it." It is not clear whether Adam is blaming the woman or God for his actions. "The woman You put here with me", is Adam's attempt to avoid the responsibility for his actions.

In the context of Abram is passive, caught as he is between a childless and humiliated wife and the rights of the slave woman who has become pregnant by him. You cannot envy Abram his predicament. His response is very familiar, instead of taking a lead he opts out and hands the responsibility to Sarai who needs his support not passivity at this moment.

6 "Your servant is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.

The feminist biblical scholar Phyllis Trible, entitles her chapter on Hagar's flight from Sarai, "The Desolation of Rejection". She points out that as the story of Israel is a story of flight from bondage to promise, so the story of Hagar is in itself a flight from bondage. Hagar, too, flees from her harsh mistress, and like Israel, she finds refuge in the wilderness. There, God finds her and tells her to return. The first words that Hagar speaks in the story, she speaks to God in direct answer to his question: 'From where have you come and where are you going?'

God commands her to return and submit to her mistress, which Trible interprets as "a divine word of terror to an abused, yet courageous, woman."<sup>10</sup> God, who will later identify with the oppressed, seems here to identify with the oppressor, but he does not send her back without promise. To Hagar, God says "I will so greatly multiply your descendants, that they cannot be numbered for multitude' (16:10, RSV). While all the patriarchs of Israel hear such words, Hagar is the only woman ever to receive them. And yet this promise to her lacks the covenant context that is so crucial to the founding fathers."<sup>11</sup> In studying Hagar's story, Trible sees "a symbol of the oppressed." She says, "Most especially, all sorts of rejected women find their stories in her": exploited maids, surrogate mothers, resident aliens, the expelled wife, the homeless woman, the welfare mother, "the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in service to others."

Whether you agree with Phyllis Trible's assessment of the core meaning of the text, or not, it is all too easy to overlook Hagar. She is, after all, the slave woman, not Abram's first wife. Her son Ishmael is a troublemaker. She disrespects and mocks Sarai. Her role seems secondary to the great figures of Abram, Sarai and Isaac and her presence may seem an intrusion into the stories that resonate so easily for us. Hagar is the personality that could so easily be overlooked. She is like the man who fills your tank at the petrol station, or the person you from whom you bought your newspaper, or the team that swept the street while you slept last night. They all have the potential to be significant – to be part of our lives, but they are almost invisible. Just like them Hagar is forgettable. But Hagar is the protagonist in this part of the story, a critical figure in biblical theology, as Rabbi Jeffrey

Salkin points out, "She is the first woman to be told that she would have a child, the first woman to hear a Divine promise to her descendants. She is the first woman to weep for a dying child. She is the first person to be visited by an angel. Not only this, she is the only person in Bible who names God, El-roee, God Who Sees." <sup>12</sup>

7 The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur.

8 And he said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?" "I'm running away from my mistress Sarai," she answered.

Hagar's experience is that God sees her even in the wilderness. Last month I was in the Sinai wilderness with a tour group. We were reminded that people usually only went into the wilderness when they were on the run from something or someone. It was a place to hide, but also a place of dread and danger. It is probable that Hagar was on her way back to Egypt when the Angel of the Lord found her.

9 Then the angel of the LORD told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her."

Hagar is stopped and redirected back to her mistress Sarai. There is no promise that she is going to be treated any better. She is told to return and to submit to Sarai. Hagar had an incredible decision to make at that moment. She could hold the resentment against Sarai for mistreating her or she could let it go.

*I am indebted to Dr Tony Campolo for these two stories.*

When Bill Clinton met Nelson Mandela for the first time, he asked Nelson Mandela, "When they released you from prison, I got Chelsea up at three in the morning because I wanted have her see this historic moment".

"As you walked across the courtyard, from the cellblock to the gate of the prison, the television cameras focused in on your face. I have never seen such anger, such animosity, and such hatred. I mean, you usually can't see that so clearly revealed but it was all over you. It looked like intense resentment. President Mandela, that is not the Nelson Mandela that I know today. Could you explain what was going on?"

Nelson Mandela says, "You're the first one that brought that to my attention. I didn't know that anybody noticed that. But as they released me from the prison block and as I walked across the courtyard to the gate, I thought to myself, 'They've taken everything away from me, my family is destroyed, my cause has been crushed, my friends are dead, anything, anybody, that meant anything to me, they've destroyed it all,' and I hated them with a fiery hatred. And then God spoke to me, and said, 'Nelson, for 27 years, you were their prisoner, but you were always a free man. Don't let them make you into a free man, only to turn you into their prisoner.'"

Nelson Mandela has many quotable quotes but surely one of his best is, "*Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies.*"

We have to be careful when we fight the dragon, lest we become the dragon.

*Peter Arnett from CNN tells the following story.*

I was reporting from the West Bank, and a terrorist bomb went off. Bodies were flying through the air. There was blood all over. A man came running up to me, holding in his

hands a girl that was badly wounded, bloody from head to toe. The man holding this little girl in his arms said to me, 'Mister, the soldiers have sealed off the area. They won't let anybody in and anybody out. If I don't get her to a hospital, she is going to die. You can see that she is going to die if I don't get her out of here. You're the press; you can get us out of the lines. Please, please will you help?'"

Peter Arnett said, "What could I do? I put them in the back of the car, I covered them with a blanket, and we made our way through the lines. And on the way to Tel Aviv, he kept on saying, 'Go faster, please, mister, go faster,' and then he started moaning, 'I'm losing her, I'm losing her, I'm losing her!'"

Peter said, "When we got to the hospital, we rushed the girl into the operating room, dropped her on the table, came out, and sat on the bench outside the operating room totally dissipated and exhausted because of the tension that we had just been through. I was taking a deep breath when the doctor came out of the room and said, '*She's dead.*' The man convulsed in tears. He screamed and he cried, and I put my arm around him and tried to comfort him. I said to him, 'I don't know what to say. I don't have any children. I don't know what it's like to lose a daughter.'

The man looked up at me and said, 'Oh, that little girl isn't my daughter. That Palestinian girl is not my daughter. I am a Jewish settler.' And then he said, "But maybe the time has come when all of us must learn to look on every child as a son and as a daughter."<sup>13</sup>

10 The angel added, "I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count."

11 The angel of the LORD also said to her: "You are now with child and you will have a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the LORD has heard of your misery."

The promise that the Angel of the Lord gives to Hagar is that promise of a future. It is not the absence of trouble or the assurance of prosperity but rather the hope of a future.

Part of this hope is the name given to the son that she bore. *Yishmael* in Hebrew, literally means, 'God will hear.' It is a memorial name to remind Hagar that the Lord heard her misery. This is not just the hearing of an auditory cry but a deeper form of hearing – the hearing of empathy. When God hears He hears with His heart. The parallel with the Israelites and the Exodus is very strong at this point in the text.

**Exodus 2:23-25.** *The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.*

12 He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers."

The description of Ishmael has elicited a number of interpretations from the rabbinic sages.

According to the Targum<sup>14</sup>; cf. Ibn Ezra *Pereh Adam* in Hebrew. *Pereh* is a wild donkey (cf. Isaiah 32:14, Hosea 8:9, Job 6:5, 11:12, 24:5) and hence, it can be translated, 'a wild donkey of a man' (*Targum Yonathan*; Ramban). Rashi interprets

it to mean an 'outdoor man' or 'a man who will live in Paran.' (part of the Negev Desert.)

In Hebrew (unlike English), the noun always precedes the adjective, as in "adam gadol" (great man). Thus in the phrase, "perch adam," the noun is "perch" and the adjective is "adam" indicting that Yishmael will always be wild and without restraint. <sup>15</sup>

- 13 She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me."
- 14 That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi ; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.

"God who sees me" puts together 'el, אֱלֹהִים the generic word for God with the noun רֹאֶה, רָאָה "looking, appearance." is one thing to know in theory that God knows you and loves you. It is an entirely different thing to be suddenly aware of God's presence and personal care over you. Hagar's experience -- and the spring at which it took place became well-known in Israel, for a well by the name Beer Lahai Roi, בְּאֵר לְחַי רֹאֵה "Well of the Living One who Sees Me," was remembered when the story was written down.(16:14) There are difficulties with the translation of the name of the well and the rabbinic sages reflect a slight variation in their understanding of the name the location of the site. 'Well of the life-giving vision,' (*HaKethav VeHaKabbalah*); 'Well of the vision of the Living One' (Rashi; *Targum*); or 'Well to the Living One who sees me' (Ibn Ezra). Ibn Ezra identifies this with Zimum (or in other versions, Zimzum), where the Arabs hold an annual festival. This is Zemzem near Mecca. According to this, however, Hagar headed into the Arabian Peninsula rather than toward Egypt which is unlikely given her background and the local geography.

- 15 So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne.
- 16 Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

It's noteworthy that in verses 15 and 16 Sarah is no longer mentioned. Hagar's son is born to Abraham, and Abraham himself (not Sarah) names him, bestowing on him the name that the Lord had revealed to Hagar, Ishmael, "God hears."

Instead of shifting responsibility for the child to his wife, he takes it upon himself where it belongs. And though difficulties would lie ahead for them, God saw and God heard, and God watched out for this Egyptian slave and her child. Why? Because God was keeping his promises to Abraham and to his offspring -- the promise that continues on to this day.

### **What do we learn from this portion of Genesis?**

1. God-fearing people sometimes try to fulfill God's will in their own ways – often missing the fullness of God's provision. God's plans are not frustrated by our mistakes and he is even able to use our mistakes to accomplish his plans.
2. God-fearing people like Abraham and Sarah can still give into resentment and cruelty, anger and irresponsibility, and pride of class, position, and status. You don't have to be a Patriarch to fall into these traps! Resentment is a poison from we must flee.

3. God sees people who are foreigners, unbelievers, and of low social status. God, is the protector of the downtrodden, delights in helping the despised. Hagar stands alone in the Bible as one who assigns a name to the deity and is the only woman who receives a promise of numerous progeny. Yahweh appears directly to her in the form of an angel and she is never the same again. Because of this we should be careful about our attitudes to such people.
4. God calls us not to ease our own way, but to go His way, even if it means hardship and suffering. We are not called to pleasure, but to the will of God. He calls us to obey even when it is hard -- and honours us (and Hagar) when we do so.

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<sup>1</sup> All references from the New International Version

<sup>2</sup> The Talmud (Hebrew: תלמוד) is a record of rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, customs, and history. It is one of the central books of Judaism, second only to the Torah and Hebrew Bible. The Talmud has two components: the Mishnah (c. 200 CE), the first written compendium of Judaism's Oral Law; and the Gemara (c. 500 CE), a discussion of the Mishnah and related Tannaitic writings that often ventures onto other subjects and expounds broadly on the Tanakh (The Hebrew Scriptures).

<sup>3</sup> Yevamot (*lit.* Levirate Marriage) the third Tractate of the Mishnah. It deals with laws pertaining to women and family life. The term in brackets Beraisa, (plural beraisos) refers to a body of teachings authored during the same period as the Mishnah, but not included in that text; when not capitalized, the term refers to a single teaching of this type.

<sup>4</sup> Ganz, Deborah. 2006 Parashat Lekh-lekha 5767/ November 4, 2006. Bar-Ilan University's Parashat Hashavua Study Center

<sup>5</sup> Leibowitz, Nehama. Studies in Bereshit (Genesis) Israel : Maor Wallach Press

<sup>6</sup> RAMBAN Moshe ben Nahman Gerondi "Nahmanides " 1194 – c. 1270 (רמב"ן Ramban)

<sup>7</sup> Leibowitz, Nehama. Studies in Bereshit (Genesis) Israel : Maor Wallach Press

<sup>8</sup> RASHI Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaqi, (Hebrew: יצחקי שלמה רבי), better known by the acronym Rashi (Hebrew: ראש"י), (February 22, 1040 – July 13, 1105), was a rabbi from France, famed as the author of the first comprehensive commentaries on the Talmud, Torah and Tanakh (Hebrew Bible).

<sup>9</sup> Leibowitz, Nehama. Studies in Bereshit (Genesis) Israel : Maor Wallach Press

<sup>10</sup> Tribble, Phyllis. 1984. Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives. Philadelphia: Fortress Press,

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Quoted by, Katz, Rabbi Barry. Parashat Vayera Seeing Her: Hagar.

<sup>13</sup> Dr. Tony Campolo Chapel Address October 9, 2001 <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/16827.htm>

<sup>14</sup> A Targum (Hebrew: תרגום, plural: *targumim*, lit. "translation, interpretation") is an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (Tanakh) written or compiled from the Second Temple period until the early Middle Ages (late first millennium).

<sup>15</sup> Kagan, Rabbi Yisrael Meir. The Chofetz Chaim (The Desirer of Life) published in 1873