

Genesis 16:7-16

The Birth of Ishmael

“¹Now Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ²Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, ‘so may the gods do to me and even more, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time.’ ³And he was afraid and arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. ⁴But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die. . . . ⁹Then he came there to a cave and lodged there; and behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and He said to him, ‘what are you doing here, Elijah?’ ¹⁰He said, ‘I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.’ . . . ¹⁵The Lord said to him, ‘go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus’”
(1 Kings 19:1-4, 9-10, 15).

Elijah had only just confronted and conquered the priests of the pagan god Baal on Mount Carmel. He had demonstrated remarkable faith in challenging the priests of Baal to a contest to determine who was the one true God. After God had vindicated Elijah’s faith, he had boldly ordered the execution of those priests who served that pagan deity. He then confronted the wicked king Ahab and informed him that through his own prayers, God would lift the drought that had devastated the land for three years. With great clarity, Scripture recorded that “the hand of the Lord was on Elijah” (1 Kings 18:46).

But then, from this incandescent height of spiritual power and personal achievement, Elijah heard that the sinister queen Jezebel wanted his life, and Elijah simply fled.

One lesson in this, among many others, is that God is sovereign and faithful to those Whom He calls. God had called Elijah, and despite Elijah’s failure, God continues to use Elijah to His purposes. God’s strength would be sufficient for Elijah. God would protect His prophet when Elijah returned to confront Ahab and Jezebel. Since Elijah’s ministry was God’s sovereign choice, God ensured that His purposes would be accomplished.

There are many similarities between this narrative about Elijah told in 1 Kings 19 and that about Hagar that we find before us this morning. Both Hagar and Elijah had fled in order to avoid a dangerous situation. Both Hagar and Elijah were wandering in the wilderness without any apparent direction. Both Hagar and Elijah were encountered by an angel of the Lord. And both Hagar and Ishmael were commanded to return from whence they had come. God had chosen both to serve His greater purposes, and God was faithful to find them when they were lost and set them back on the right track.

Two Good Questions

As Hagar wandered, “the angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness” (v. 7). The phrase “angel of the Lord [Yahweh]” (58 times) and “angel of God” (11 times) appear frequently in the

Old Testament. Though the language can be complicated and at times unclear, in most of those cases it seems that the reference implies that the angel is God Himself. For example, in Genesis 16:11, the angel states “the Lord has given heed to your affliction” as if the angel is speaking *for* the Lord. But in verse 13, Hagar “called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, ‘You are a God who sees.’” This implies that the angel *was* the Lord.

Consider also, Genesis 21:17, another incident where God spoke to Hagar. “God heard the lad crying; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, ‘what is the matter with you, Hagar? Do not fear, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is.’” Similar wording is used in the episode in which Abraham is commanded to offer his son, Isaac,

“¹¹but the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘here I am.’ ¹²He said, ‘do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me’” (Genesis 22:11-12).

Jacob had a similar encounter.

“¹¹Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, ‘Jacob,’ and I said, ‘here I am.’ ¹²He said, ‘lift up now your eyes and see that all the male goats which are mating are striped, speckled, and mottled; for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you. ¹³I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar, where you made a vow to Me; now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birth.’” (Genesis 31:11-13).

Moses (Exodus 3:2, 4), Gideon (Judges 6:12, 14), and Samson’s father Manoah (Judges 13:6, 9, 22) all had similar experiences in which an “angel of the Lord” appeared to them and was also identified from context as God. Furthermore, as we will see the “angel of the Lord” promised Hagar descendants beyond her ability to count. Surely an angel did not possess that authority. Life comes from God alone, and the context is clear that it is the angel who will give her the children. That is, the angel is not merely relaying a message from God. Also, in Exodus 23:20-23, it seems that the angel has the authority to forgive sin. Again something distinctive to God alone. Therefore, it is clear from the body of biblical evidence then, that the “angel of the Lord” or the “angel of God” is a manifestation of God Himself. To put it another way, the reference to the “angel of the Lord” is not as a representative of God, but as a representation of God.

The Lord found Hagar “by the spring on the way to Shur” (v. 7). This may be a reference to either a specific site or the general region. Some scholars have argued that since the word ‘Shur’ means ‘wall’ what is being referred to is the series of defences established by Egypt along its northeastern border to keep out incursions. Other biblical references, however, indicate that this is a reference to a spring that was located in the southern part of Canaan, near Kadesh-barnea. This was the northwestern part of the Sinai desert, and it eventually became home to both the Ishmaelites and the Amalekites.

The road Hagar traveled was likely the same that Abram and his family had taken when they journeyed to Egypt during the time of famine many years earlier. It was also the general area through which the Israelites passed as they made their exodus from Egypt hundreds of years later. One conclusion we can

draw in either case is that this means Hagar had likely traveled quite a distance before she was encountered by God.

We must also point out that this finding of Hagar was an intentional act of God. God was not simply scanning the desert looking for what He might find. God did not stumble upon her. He deliberately chose to present Himself to Hagar. This was an act of divine election. With no small amount of irony, God found the fertile Hagar in the barren wilderness, while her mistress remained barren in the fertile land of Canaan.

As with Elijah, God asked Hagar a question, two questions actually. “He said, ‘Hagar, Sarai’s maid, where have you come from and where are you going?’” (v. 8). That is, God asked questions that concerned Hagar’s status in the house where she served as a slave, and the future of her child. But our omniscient God could not have been asking these to gain information. The questions were not meant for Him, but for her. A similar dialogue can be remembered from the Garden, in which God asked Adam, “where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). God knew where Adam was, just as He knew from whence Hagar had come and where she was going. The purpose of the questions was to engage Hagar in a conversation about her future.

Hagar answered the first question quickly and easily enough. “I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai” (v.8). That she did not answer the second question about her destination may have been because, though she had certainly set out for her homeland of Egypt, she had perhaps traveled so far and run out of whatever provisions she had taken, she was not certain she could make it the rest of the way. One can easily imagine Hagar as she despairingly tried to restore her energy at the spring. Having, perhaps, abandoned hope of ever returning to Egypt, and certain she could not return to Sarai and Abram, trying to determine which way to go next.

A Promise Made

God’s first response to Hagar was clear and commanding. “The angel of the Lord said to her, ‘return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority’” (v. 9). Hagar was a slave, and despite the mistreatment she received at the hands of Sarai, she had no right to run away. Her obligation was to submit, regardless of the mistress whom she served. God had a sovereign purpose for this lowly slave, her station notwithstanding. We can be reminded of the slave Onesimus, whom Paul instructed to return to his master (Philemon 12). As Abram had said that Hagar was to be under the control of Sarai, so she was to be.

This must have been terrifying news to Hagar. She certainly believed he was being sent back to at the very least severe punishment for running away, and perhaps even death. The angel did not assure her that Sarai’s response would be generous, or even fair. Yet Hagar offered neither rebuttal nor resistance. She prepared to return to her mistress. Much like her master Abram, when God called, she went. Hagar, the slave and concubine, had faith like her master.

But God had not yet finished speaking to Hagar. And being the gracious God that He is, He did not send her back without hope.

“¹⁰The angel of the Lord said to her, ‘I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they will be too many to count.’ ¹¹The angel of the Lord said to her further,

‘Behold, you are with child,
And you will bear a son;
And you shall call his name Ishmael,
Because the Lord has given heed to your affliction.

¹²He will be a wild donkey of a man,
His hand will be against everyone,
And everyone’s hand will be against him;
And he will live to the east of all his brothers” (v. 10-12).

This promise was remarkable. Not only would Hagar have a child, she knew that already, but it would be a male child. That was good news to her. She had provided her master with an heir. And in addition, she would have even more descendants than she could number. The language was reminiscent of the promises made to Abram. Such profound and generous blessing must have been difficult for this wandering slave to imagine. To bring further attention to the magnitude and uniqueness of this promise, it is worth noting that though many men are promised children during the patriarchal era - Abram (Genesis 12:2), Isaac (Genesis 26:4), Jacob (Genesis 28:3-4) - Hagar is the only woman in Genesis honored with such a promise.

And make no mistake, this was as much a revelation of God as was that given to Abram. Hagar was not hallucinating under the intense, desert heat. After all, not only Abram, but also Moses (Exodus 3:1), Elijah (1 Kings 19:4), and John the Baptist (Luke 3:2) received such revelations in the wilderness. This was the sovereign act of God choosing those who would serve Him.

Hagar was told she will have a son, and that she is to call him Ishmael (v. 11). The announcement of the upcoming birth of a child was often accompanied by a declaration as to the name of that child. The birth announcements of Isaac (Genesis 17:19), Isaiah’s son, Maher-shalal-hash-baz, (Isaiah 8:3), Hosea’s son, Jezreel, (Hosea 1:4), and of course Jesus (Matthew 1:21) all coincided with the proclamation of the name by which the child should be called.

This has been a cause of much conversation among biblical scholars since, God was referring to Himself as Yahweh and yet God commanded that the child be called *Ishmael*, that is after *El* another name for God frequently used in the Old Testament. It seems a more appropriate name for the context might have been *Ishmaiah*. Some have thus argued that this is a textual problem and they insist that it gives evidence of different authors and different sources being involved in the writing of Genesis, rather than a single author, Moses.

But there is no cause for concern, as other places in the Old Testament combine the names of God in this way. For example, “it came about in due time, after Hannah had conceived, that she gave birth to a son;

and she named him Samuel, saying, “Because I have asked him of the Lord” (1 Samuel 1:20). Here the child was given the name *Samuel* but clearly Hannah was thankful to the Lord, that is Yahweh.

Though the promise of a son, and in fact many descendants, must have been joyous news to Hagar, the details given regarding that son were discouraging at best. He would be “a wild donkey of a man” (v. 12). This vivid and disconcerting description referenced the onager, a desert dwelling member of the horse family that lived among the wastelands. Perhaps Hagar even looked up to notice one drinking from the spring nearby. These beasts became a metaphor for desolation.

“Because the palace has been abandoned, the populated city forsaken.
Hill and watch-tower have become caves forever,
A delight for wild donkeys” (Isaiah 32:14).

“The wild donkeys stand on the bare heights;
They pant for air like jackals,
Their eyes fail
For there is no vegetation” (Jeremiah 14:6).

This implied a prophecy of a nomadic, desert lifestyle for Ishmael and his descendants. Ishmael’s lifestyle would thus be one lived outside the normal social conventions. But worse, perhaps than the solitude in which Ismael would live was the prophecy of the hostile behavior that would be indicative of Ishmael’s life. “His hand will be against everyone, and everyone’s hand will be against him” (v. 13). This was a Hebrew idiom that indicated that Ishmael would be in constant conflict with his neighbors. It reminds the reader of the other non-elect lines of Genesis, that of Cain and Esau. Both of these men lived in hostility to their brothers as well.

The prophecy would be fulfilled in detail. At the end of his life, when Scripture related Ishmael’s descendants it recorded that “¹⁷these are the years of the life of Ishmael, one hundred and thirty-seven years; and he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people. ¹⁸They settled from Havilah to Shur which is east of Egypt as one goes toward Assyria; he settled in defiance of all his relatives” (Genesis 25:17-18). Yet, as upsetting as this was, at least implicit in the description of Ishmael was the promise that upon Hagar’s return to Sarai, she would not be so severely punished that she would lose her unborn child.

Hagar’s response is deeply moving. She rejoices not in the promise of a child, but in the fact that she had been honored with a divine revelation. “¹³she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, ‘You are a God who sees’; for she said, ‘have I even remained alive here after seeing Him?’ ¹⁴Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; behold, it is between Kadesh and Bered” (v. 13-14). It is the source, rather than the content of her revelation that is her focus. Hagar no longer gloats over her ability to conceive a child through Abram. Her attention is entirely on God.

Interestingly, Hagar also conferred a name on the Lord. For the only time in the Old Testament, a mere mortal named God. She called Him in the Hebrew *El Roi*, a God Who sees. The Lord had been the first to bestow a name; He had commanded Hagar to call her child Ishmael. Now it is Hagar who declared the

name. And the name was extended to the place where she received the revelation. The name *Beer-lahai-roi* draws attention to the fact that God had shown Himself to her. It testified to the graciousness of a God Who sought out a pregnant wandering woman in the wilderness. The name is literally translated “the well belonging to the Loving One Who has seen me.” With the name of this well, Hagar acknowledged the sovereign call of a gracious God.

A Promise Fulfilled

Naturally, Scripture records that it came to pass exactly as God had said. “¹⁵Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. ¹⁶Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to him” (v. 15-16). Hagar had returned to Sarai. Her reception there is not discussed in Scripture. And the future would make clear that the issues raised by the conception of Ishmael would not dissipate in the joyful celebration of his birth. Abram and Sarai would continue to have difficulties over the fact that Abram’s heir was of his own body, but not of Sarai’s.

Note that Scripture records that it was Abram who named the child. This was likely because, having returned home, Hagar had given an account of her encounter with God in the wilderness. While Sarai may have been disbelieving, we will see that being skeptical was a part of Sarai’s character, Abram had experienced God in his own revelations, and understood the significance of the event. So, when Hagar told Abram that the child would be a boy and would be called Ishmael, Abram obliged.

But this also, meant that Ishmael was acknowledged as Abram’s son. He would grow up in Abram’s household. As the child of a slave, Ishmael’s position had been far from guaranteed. But as the child of Abram, his life looked much more promising. Implied also, however, is Sarai’s distance. We can point out that it was Leah who named the children born to Jacob by her servant Zilpah (Genesis 30:11, 13). And it was Rachel who named the children born to Jacob by her servant Bilhah (Genesis 30:6-7). But in this case, Sarai played no role in the naming of the child. Her original intent to “obtain children through her” (Genesis 16:2) was not to be realized. That was because it was never in God’s plan for Abram to fulfill the covenant in that way. The plan had been wrong from the beginning, and it would never be right.

Takeaways

We see in this passage the gracious act of a sovereign God. God chose Abram through whom “all the families of the earth would be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). When Abram and Sarai chose to try to fulfill God’s plan by taking advantage of Hagar, God sovereignly chose her as well. God still had His plan for Abram, and that plan was still another thirteen years away from being consummated. But God chose to include Hagar in His plan as well. He was not forced to do so by any act of Abram and Sarai. That is, God was not compelled to choose Hagar because she had a child by Abram. God was sovereign over the entire situation. May we appreciate and worship the God Who truly does work in all things for His glory and our good.