

Who was Hagar in the Bible?

Hagar was an Egyptian girl who was a slave to Abram's (Abraham's) wife, Sarah. We find most of the information about Hagar in Genesis 16. After God had appeared to Abram and promised him a homeland and a heritage (Genesis 12:1-4), ten years went by, and he and Sarah still had no baby (Genesis 16:1). In her impatience, Sarah took matters into her own hands and gave her maid to her husband, saying, "Go sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her" (verses 2-3). So Abram did as she said, and Hagar became pregnant.

Despite the fact that this adulterous situation was of her own doing, Sarah became jealous when the younger, fertile slave girl began to flaunt her expanding waistline (Genesis 16:4). In anger, Sarah started treating Hagar harshly, causing Hagar to run away into the desert (verses 5-6). The angel of the Lord found her there and comforted her, telling her to return to her mistress and giving her a prophecy concerning her son: "You shall name him Ishmael, for the LORD has heard of your misery. 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" (verses 11-12). This was Hagar's first encounter with Abram's God, and she called Him "the God who sees me" (verse 13).

Later, Hagar bore a son to Abram and named him Ishmael, as the Lord had told her to (Genesis 16:15). Hagar's story resumes fourteen years later when Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 21). Shortly after Isaac was weaned, Sarah saw Ishmael taunting him and took the matter to Abraham: "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac" (Genesis 21:10). Although it grieved Abraham to do so, he gave Hagar and Ishmael some provisions and sent them away, and Ishmael and his mother wandered in the desert (verse 14).

When Hagar's food and water ran out, she did not know what to do. She put Ishmael under a bush for shade and then went a few paces away so she would not have to watch him die (Genesis 21:16). As Hagar wept, the Lord called to her from heaven with words of comfort (verse 17); God then gave her a promise: "Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation" (verse 18). The Bible says that God "opened her eyes and she saw a well of water" that she had not seen in her distress (verse 19). God rescued Hagar and gave her hope and direction. God was with Ishmael as he grew up in the desert (verse 20).

Abraham's sin with Hagar has resulted in centuries of sorrow and bloodshed, as the descendants of Isaac (the Jews) and Ishmael (the Arabs) have been mortal enemies since Bible days. Mohammed, the father of Islam, is said to have been from the line of Ishmael, which is one reason Muslims claim a right to the Promised Land, Israel. Hagar is a revered woman in Islam since Ishmael is the father of the Arabic people. The Qur'anic version of the Genesis account twists the story to make Hagar the heroine of the story and her son, Ishmael, the child of promise instead of Isaac.

The apostle Paul uses the story of Hagar and Sarah to teach a spiritual truth concerning our salvation. In Galatians 4, Hagar represents the Old Covenant, based on the Law (given at Sinai in Arabia) and human works. Sarah represents the New Covenant, based on grace and the saving work of God. In Paul's analogy, believers in Christ are like the child born of Sarah—we are free, products of the Spirit. Those who try to earn their salvation by their own works are like the child born of Hagar—they are slaves, products of the flesh. "Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman" (Galatians 4:31). Paul counsels believers to "get rid of the

slave woman” (verse 30)—that is, cease trying to earn salvation, because the inheritance of the children of promise can never be shared with those who live under the dictates of the flesh.

The story of Hagar is full of God’s goodness, and we can learn from the way God worked in Hagar’s life. She was a nobody, a foreign slave girl. Yet the Lord of Heaven saw her in her distress, provided for her need, and blessed her son because he was the child of Abraham. Hagar gave us the term El Roi, which means “the God who sees.” And her story reminds us that, no matter who we are or where we are, the Lord God sees us and cares about us. He will comfort and provide for anyone who turns to Him, and He always keeps His promises.