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Day 7 Hagar & Sarah & Abraham: Genesis 12-24

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How can ancient scripture speak to current concerns?

Some stories in the Old Testament are difficult to read because of the violence and terrors they portray. Existing in stark contrast to the many powerful Old Testament stories of God's devotion to and saving of humankind, it is easy to understand why they have traditionally been neglected.

However, as Frances Taylor Gench, Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Union Presbyterian Seminary, reminds us, "**Biblical texts ... do not exist to make us comfortable. They exist to make us think, to be engaged by God, and to effect our transformation.**" Many of these troublesome texts—of which a significant number involve the lives of women—are well poised to do just that. **The issues they raise of power, violence, abuse, complicity, and subjugation are all too relevant to today's society, and the reflection they may incite may aid us as we work toward individual and societal change.** (Easton-Flake, Recognizing Responsibility & Standing with Victims)

Speaking of Scripture Study: "You'll know you've done it right if, as a result of the work, you repent. "Say nothing but repentance unto this generation," the Lord told Oliver Cowdery when he came to help Joseph translate the Book of Mormon (D&C 6:9). This is your charge too: translate nothing but repentance. When you're reading them right, the scriptures will bring you up short. They'll call you into question. They'll challenge your stories and deflate your pretensions. They'll show you how you've been wrong and they'll show you how to make things right." Adam Miller, *Letters to a Young Mormon*

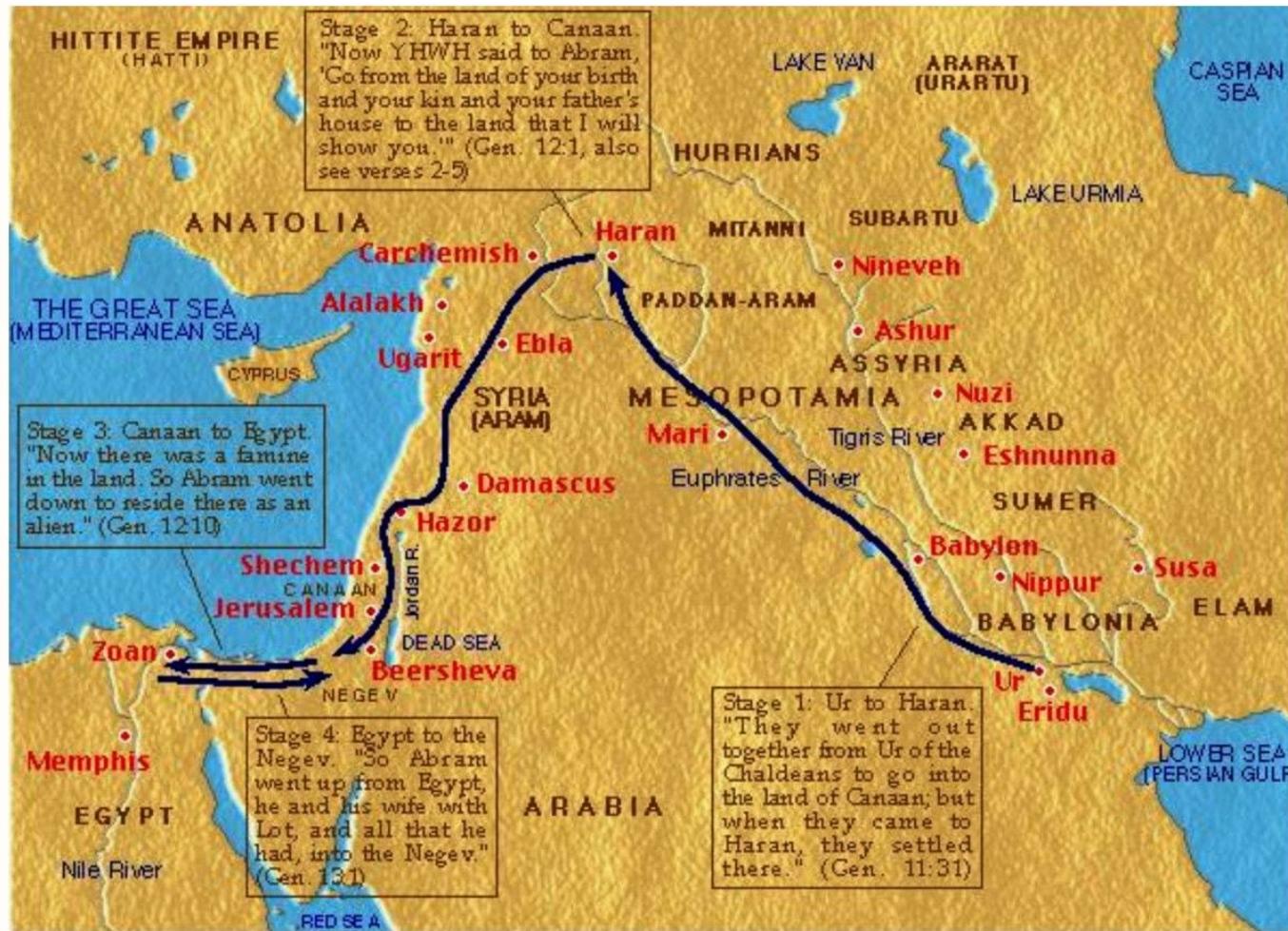
What can we learn from difficult texts? Continually learning & growing from stories . . .

Professor Phyllis Trible wrote, “Tradition history teaches that the meaning and function of biblical materials is fluid. As Scripture moves through history, it is appropriated for new settings. Varied and diverse traditions appear, disappear, and reappear from occasion to occasion.” **As members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we believe, as Elder Dallin H. Oaks writes, in “the principle that scriptures can have multiple meanings,” and we can feel comfortable in searching out multiple readings within the text, particularly when we do so aided by the Spirit.**

Within the story of Abraham’s covenant with God is the fascinating depiction of two women: Sarah and Hagar. When we read the story with these two women, the text confronts us with questions about abuse, barrenness and surrogacy, plural marriage, degrees of power, agency, and victimization. We are also compelled to think about our treatment of those who are marginalized and disadvantaged and about our responsibility to aid and assist.



Abraham & Sarah's Long Journey



"The journey to Canaan was a long one. If Ur is located in southern Mesopotamia, Abram had already journeyed with his family nearly 600 miles to Haran. If Ur is located in the north then it was about 30 miles to Haran. From Haran it is almost 500 more miles to Shechem, where Abram built an altar and where Jehovah appeared to him" (JWOT 52).

Sarah & Abraham in Egypt (Genesis 12:10-20)

Genesis 12:10-13 And there was a famine in the land: and Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn there; for the famine was grievous in the land. And it came to pass, when he was come near to enter into Egypt, that he said unto Sarai his wife, Behold now, I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon: Therefore it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see thee, that they shall say, This is his wife: and they will kill me, but they will save thee alive. **Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister: that it may be well with me for thy sake; and my soul shall live because of thee.**

Abraham 2:21-25 And I, Abraham, journeyed, going on still towards the south; and there was a continuation of a famine in the land; **and I, Abraham, concluded to go down into Egypt**, to sojourn there, for the famine became very grievous. And it came to pass when I was come near to enter into Egypt, **the Lord said unto me**: Behold, Sarai, thy wife, is a very fair woman to look upon; Therefore it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see her, they will say—**She is his wife; and they will kill you, but they will save her alive; therefore see that ye do on this wise: Let her say unto the Egyptians, she is thy sister, and thy soul shall live.** And it came to pass that I, Abraham, told Sarai, my wife, all that the Lord had said unto me—Therefore say unto them, I pray thee, thou art my sister, that it may be well with me for thy sake, and my soul shall live because of thee.

“Indeed she is my sister; she is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife.”
(Genesis 20:12)



Sarah taken into the Pharaoh's harem, ostensibly to become his wife

What was this experience like for Sarah? Did she think she would ever see her husband and other family members again? What control over her life and body did she have during this time? Though the text is unclear on whether or not she had sexual relations with Pharaoh, she would have lived in fear of sexual relations. Here, Sarah is a victim who experienced and felt who knows what terrors—even if she did (hopefully) have the faith that the Lord would save her as he had Abraham from being sacrificed by the priest of Elkenah (Abraham 1:7–16).



While the King James Version of the Bible indicates that Pharaoh had not yet taken Sarah to wife: “Why saidst thou, She is my sister? so I might have taken her to me to wife” (Genesis 12:19). The much more prevalent translation is some variant of “and I took her to me to wife” found in the NIV, NLT, ESV, ISV, ASV, etc... This translation indicates that the Pharaoh had already taken Sarah to wife, although whether or not that included sexual relations is unknown. Notably in the two other “sister-wife” accounts involving Abimelech, the text is explicit that Sarah and Rebekah have not been sexually taken.

Sarah & Abraham in Egypt(Genesis 12:10-20)

And he entreated Abram well for her sake: and he had sheep, and oxen, and he asses, and menservants, and maidservants, and she asses, and camels. And the Lord plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai Abram's wife. And Pharaoh called Abram and said, What is this that thou hast done unto me? why didst thou not tell me that she was thy wife? Why saidst thou, She is my sister? so I might have taken her to me to wife: now therefore behold thy wife, take her, and go thy way. And Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him: and they sent him away, and his wife, and all that he had.
(Genesis 12:16-20)

- Abraham 2:22-25 The Lord told him to say she was his sister
- Abraham 1:12-30 The Lord saved Abraham from being sacrificed
- Abraham has had many visions by this point . . .
- Abraham 1:18 **Behold, I will lead thee by my hand, and I will take thee to put upon thee my name . . . and my power shall be over thee.**
- Abraham 2:8-9 **My name is Jehovah, and I know the end from the beginning; therefore, my hand shall be over thee. . . . and I will bless thee above measure.**
- Abraham 3:15 And the Lord said unto me: Abraham, I show these things unto thee before ye go into Egypt, that ye may declare all these words.



How could
Abraham & Sarah
do what they do?

Motherhood & Barrenness in Ancient Israel



If we are to read with her, we must first seek to understand her and her actions in light of cultural expectations. Sarah desperately desires a child, in particular a son, likely because she wants to bring about the fulfillment of God's promise to her husband that he shall have posterity as numberless as the stars in heaven (Genesis 15:4-5) and because in ancient near eastern society a woman's worth is invariably linked to her ability to bare children. Additionally, God was believed to control the womb, so barrenness was often viewed as a punishment from God. As Sarah, herself, stated, "Behold now, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing" (Genesis 16:2). What must this have been like for Sarah to endure decades of infertility believing that God was deliberately preventing her from having a child? How difficult was it for Sarah to admit her body's inability to have a child and offer Hagar to Abraham with the hope that she might "obtain children by her" (Genesis 16:2)? Was this her idea as indicated in Genesis 16:1 or are her words a response to a commandment from the Lord? As we learn from a revelation given to Joseph Smith, the Lord "commanded Abraham to take Hagar to wife" (D&C 132:65).

Surrogacy Context

“Evidence from ancient texts show that this arrangement, although not common, was once a regular feature of family relations. Three ancient Near Eastern marriage contracts stipulate that should the bride be barren after a specified number of years, she will give her husband her slave. . . . Ancient societies accepted slavery as a regular part of social life. Using another person’s body as a surrogate for one’s own is part of the fabric of slavery. . . . Sarai plans that Hagar’s womb will be the way that Sarai herself will be built up” (Frymer-Kensky 227)



Sarah was not originally mentioned as a part of the promise of Abraham's descendants

12:1 Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.

13:14 And the Lord said unto Abram, after that Lot was separated from him, Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward: For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed forever. And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth: so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered.



How does this impact your reading of Sarah giving Hagar to Abraham?

Sarah's treatment of Hagar

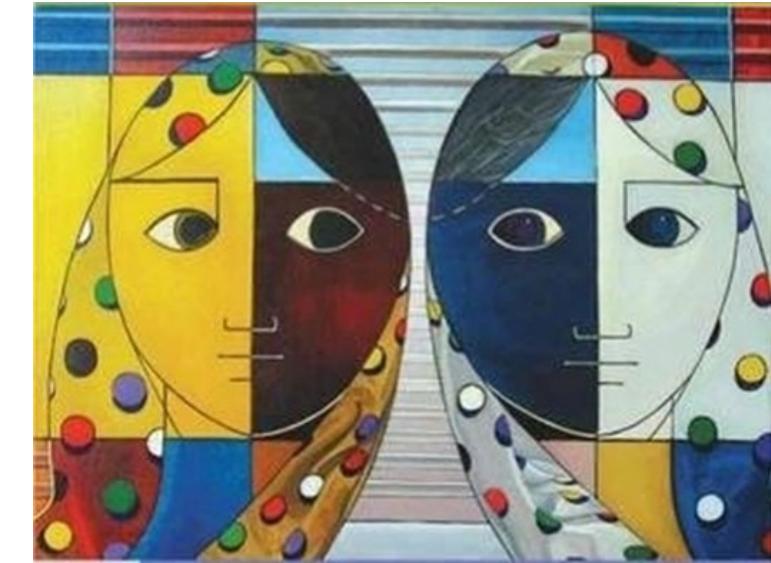


Reading with Sarah: How must Sarah have felt when Hagar conceived and she saw her own importance diminishing within the household (Genesis 16:1–6)? What was life like for Sarah during the fourteen years that Hagar had a child and she did not? (Remember that she believes she will never have a child). What anguish did she suffer? How has her status been diminished? What did it feel like to believe that the Lord's promise made to her husband of numberless posterity did not include her as well (Genesis 15:4–5)? To read with Sarah is to recognize that the Lord's promise to Abraham did not at first specify Sarah as co-progenitor (Genesis 15:2–5, Abraham 2:9–11).

2 And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai. . . . And he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived: and when she saw that she had conceived, **her mistress was despised in her eyes.** And Sarai said unto Abram, My wrong be upon thee: I have given my maid into thy bosom; and when she saw that she had conceived, **I was despised in her eyes:** the Lord judge between me and thee. But Abram said unto Sarai, Behold, thy maid is in thine hand; do to her as it pleaseth thee. **And when Sarai dealt hardly with her, she fled from her face.**

The power struggle between Sarah & Hagar: What is going on here?

From the text, we learn that conceiving a child alters Hagar. She gains a greater sense of her own worth, and she is no longer respectful and subservient to Sarah. Rather she “despised” her (Genesis 16:4 KJV) or “looked with contempt on her mistress” (Genesis 16:4 NRS). What this may have looked like in actuality we do not know, but many commentators uncomfortable with Sarah’s treatment of Hagar have used this description to justify Sarah’s treatment of Hagar and to place the blame on Hagar. Other interpreters recognizing the significant power differential between the two women do not allow Hagar’s contempt for Sarah to justify Sarah’s actions towards Hagar, but they do acknowledge how difficult this seeming loss of power and status would have been for Sarah. From the text, we learn that Sarah responds to Hagar’s contempt by dealing “hardly” with her (Genesis 16:6 KJV). “In the Piel stem the verb ‘) הִנְעַנָּה means ‘to afflict, to oppress, to treat harshly, to mistreat.’” What this looked like in reality is open to multiple interpretations. It could mean that Sarah reverts to treating Hagar like an ordinary slave or it could mean that Sarah harshly abuses Hagar. One simply does not know.



Though Sarah was the chosen matriarch of the House of Israel, she was also a fallen individual—like all of us—in need of a Savior. We must condemn her actions towards Hagar, but we should understand them within the context of her own experiences including barrenness and her time in the Pharaoh’s harem

How can ancient scripture speak to today's concerns?

As Hagar's story depicts oppression in the familiar forms of sex, class, and nationality, it may serve as a valuable starting point for discussing needed societal changes in each of these areas. Sitting with Hagar in the oppression she experienced should not be shied away from, as hopefully the insights we gain by doing so will inspire us to know how to personally apply the counsel from our Prophet Russell M. Nelson "to build bridges of cooperation instead of walls of segregation." "To lead out in abandoning attitudes and actions of prejudice . . . [and] to promote respect for all of God's children" (October 2020)

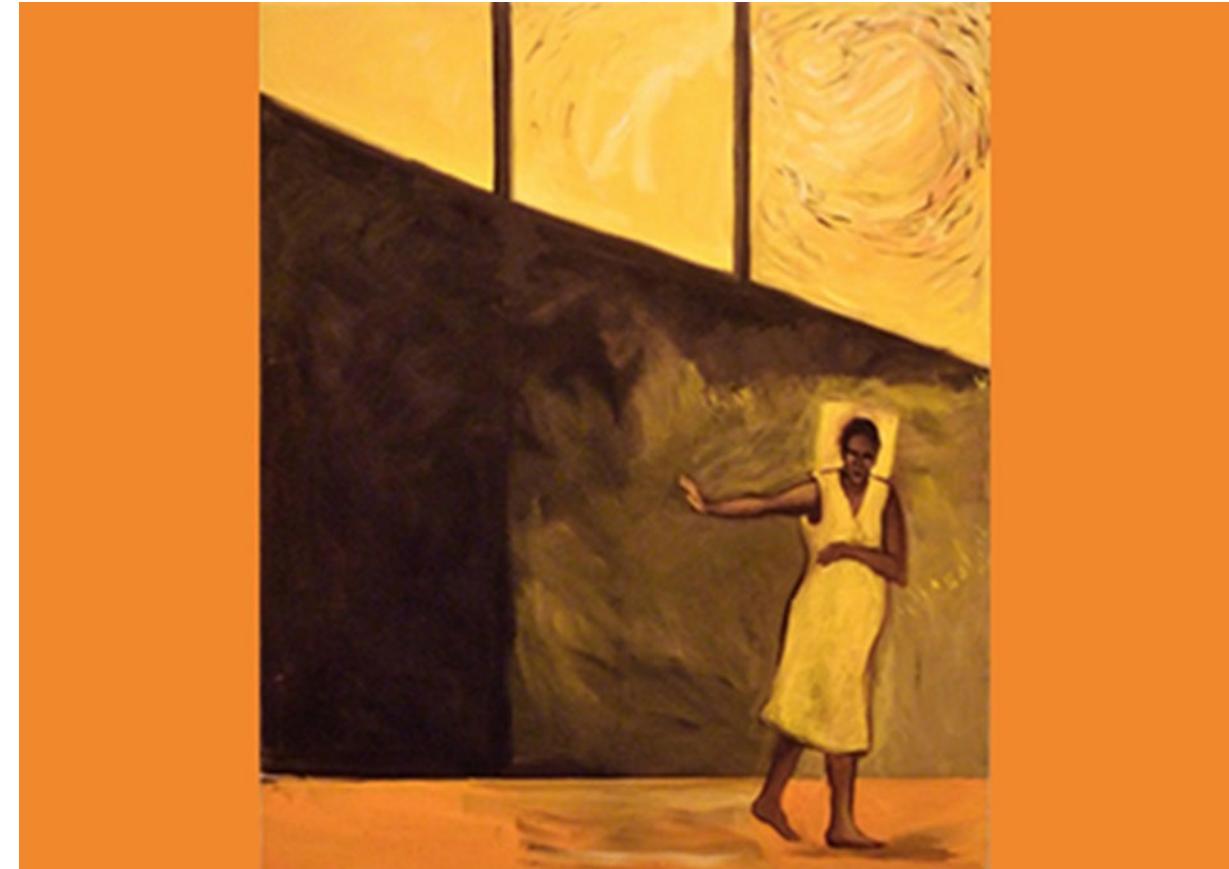
Church Handbook of Instruction. "The church calls on all people to abandon attitudes and actions of prejudice toward any group or individual. . . . This includes prejudice based on race, ethnicity, nationality, tribe, gender, age, disability, socioeconomic status, religious belief or nonbelief, and sexual orientation."



Appreciating Hagar—one of the most remarkable women in Scripture

16:6 And when Sarai dealt hardly with her, she fled from her face.

Explaining the context in which this decision takes place, Carol Meyers, Professor Emerita of Religious Studies at Duke University, writes, “the concept of either women or men striving for personal independence is antithetical to the dynamics and demands of premodern agrarians.” “A person’s sense of individual agency was derived from her or his contribution to household life rather than from individual accomplishment. Household members did not act on their own wants or desires.” Consequently, in fleeing, Hagar demonstrates both courage and a surprising sense of self.



What is remarkable about Hagar's encounter with an angel?



7 And the angel of the Lord found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness, by the fountain in the way to Shur.

8 And he said, Hagar, Sarai's maid, whence camest thou? and whither wilt thou go? And she said, I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai. . . .

10 And the angel of the Lord said unto her, I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude.

11 And the angel of the Lord said unto her, Behold, thou art with child and shalt bear a son, and shalt call his name Ishmael; because the Lord hath heard thy affliction.

12 And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.

13 And she called the name of the Lord that spake unto her, Thou God seest me: for she said, Have I also here looked after him that seeth me?

What is remarkable about Hagar's encounter with an angel?



- An angel of the Lord appears to her.
- She becomes the first woman in the Old Testament to hear a birth annunciation.
- She is the only woman in the Bible to receive a divine promise of numerous descendants, not through a man but as her own prerogative
- Hagar also becomes the only person in the Old Testament to pronounce a name on a divine messenger or perhaps the Lord. Whether she is naming an angel of the Lord or the Lord himself is unclear as the text changes midway through from referencing the divine messenger as an angel of the Lord to instead the Lord: "And she called the name of the Lord that spake unto her, Thou God seest me" (Genesis 16:13).

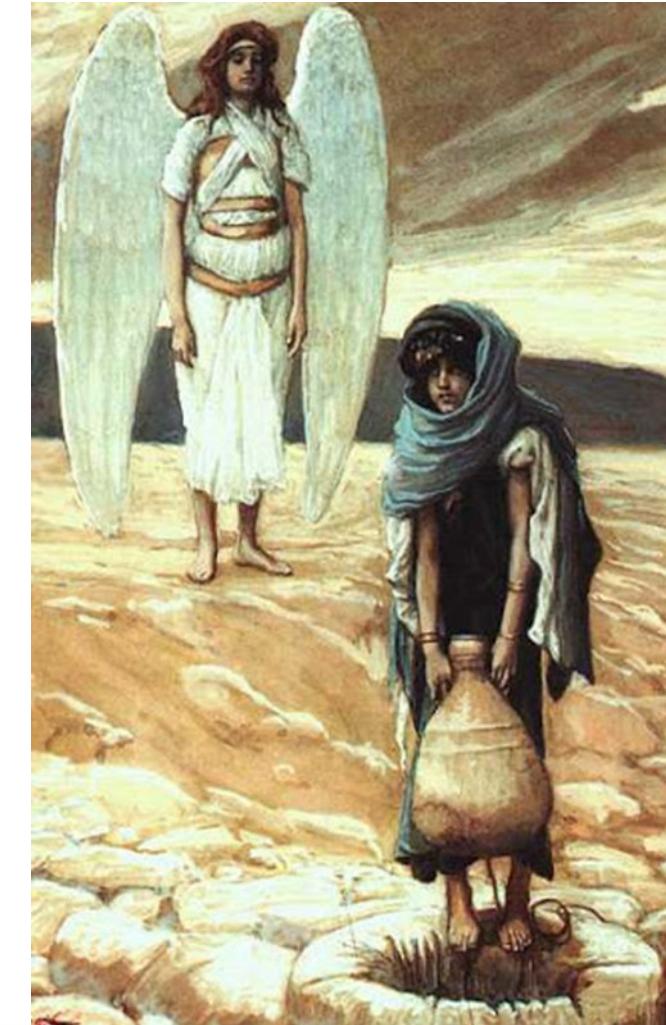
Clearly, Hagar is a singular individual who has an important role to play in God's plan. This event serves as a tangible example of Nephi's words: "he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female . . . all are alike unto God" (2 Nephi 26:33). That a divine messenger came to a female slave should alert readers to the fact that God does not support the divisions we often create to separate and subjugate one another.

And the angel of the Lord said unto her, Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands. How do we understand this command?

This command has perplexed and troubled many readers who see God as a God of liberation. Unfortunately, there is no definitive or easy way to understand this command. Many have seen it as simply a necessary part of God's plan for Abraham's descendants. After all Ishmael too undergoes the rite of circumcision and gains rights of inheritance from being born in the house of Abraham. As the Lord promises Abraham, "And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation" (Genesis 17:20). Being born in the house of Abraham and raised under Abraham's tutelage until the age of seventeen was clearly God's plan for Ishmael. Likewise, the separation of Ishmael and Isaac was possibly a part of God's plan as he sanctions Sarah's request to expel Hagar and Ishmael from Abraham's household (Genesis 21:12). Some who are dissatisfied with this answer, for a variety of reasons, turn to context to establish the impossibility of a pregnant woman surviving in the wilderness and thereby offer an alternative explanation: Hagar must return because there is no other way for her to survive. While this reading is highly plausible, it is complicated by the miracles we see God perform elsewhere to sustain the lives of the Children of Israel in the wilderness during the Exodus and to provide water for Hagar during her second time in the wilderness. Clearly, God is a God of miracles who can do all things, so why does he at times liberate and at other times say "return and submit" (Genesis 16:9)?

God's Command to Return & Submit . . . How to Understand?

Womanist theologian and Professor Emerita of Theology and Culture at Union Theological Seminary Delores Williams answers this question through a compelling reading of the story that shows that “God’s response to Hagar’s (and her child’s) situation was survival and involvement in their developments of an appropriate quality of life, that is appropriate to their situation and their heritage.” Williams argues that recognizing how God is at work in the survival and quality-of-life struggles of many families is equally important to seeing God at work in liberating individuals and communities. Summarizing Williams’s argument, Sakenfeld writes, **“since it is unlikely that racism, sexism, or economic exploitation will disappear in the near future our theology needs to have room for God to be at work supporting and caring about those who are oppressed within these structures from which there is no apparent escaping. God is present and at work in the struggles for survival and some degree of quality of life within all the brokenness of this world. . . . God helps people . . . ‘make a way out of no way.’”**





Larger Questions:

How do you experience God at work, enabling survival and offering liberation?

Hermeneutic of Grace: Looking for God's hand in our life & recognizing God's aid even in trials
God giving us the strength to endure, to fight, to overcome.

As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland eloquently states, “[Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ] sustain us in our hour of need—and always will, even if we cannot recognize that intervention” (Oct 1999). Being able to see God at work in liberation and survival/quality-of-life struggles is key to a mature faith. However, our twenty-first century discomfort with the command for Hager to “return and submit” to her oppressor will hopefully persuade us to work for the liberation of all those who are oppressed.

Once Isaac enters the family . . .

21:8 And the child grew, and was weaned: and Abraham made a great feast the same day that Isaac was weaned.

9 And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking.

10 Wherefore she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac.

11 And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son.

12 And God said unto Abraham, Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman; **in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called.**

13 And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is thy seed.

14 And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and took bread, and a bottle of water, and gave it unto Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away: and she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.

Reading with Sarah: What remarkable joy did Sarah feel when she finally conceived and bore Isaac (Genesis 21:1–8)? How protective was she of her son and how great was her fear of a dangerous rivalry between him and Ishmael? Was this a real or unsubstantiated fear (Genesis 21:9–11)? How did she feel when God sanctioned her request to banish Hagar and Ishmael from the household (Genesis 12:12)?



Sarah is clearly important to the Lord as the designated heir must be her son.

Hagar's Second Departure into the Wilderness . . .

^{21:8} And the child grew, and was weaned: and Abraham made a great feast the same day that Isaac was weaned.

⁹ And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking.

¹⁰ Wherefore she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac.

¹¹ **And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son.**

¹² **And God said unto Abraham, Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman; in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called.**

¹³ **And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is thy seed.**

¹⁴ And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and took bread, and a bottle of water, and gave it unto Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away: and she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.

** Ishmael is approximately 17 years old*

Reading with Abraham: How did he do it? How did he feel about Ishmael & Hagar?

^{17:18-20} And Abraham said unto God, **O that Ishmael might live before thee! . . . And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation.**

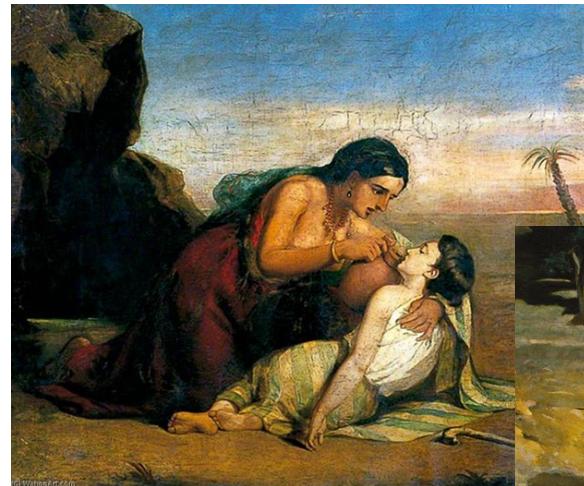


Abraham trusts the Lord will protect Ishmael just as he later does with Isaac

Hagar's Second Departure into the Wilderness . . .

Once in the wilderness, God miraculously preserves them and again pronounces a great future for Ishmael. Reading into the last line of their story, “his mother took him a wife out of the land of Egypt” (Genesis 21:21), Dr. Frymer-Kensky points out how Hagar has become the head of her family and lineage. “The final note in the story reminds us that Ishmael’s future is shaped by Hagar’s understanding. A single mother, she is both father and mother, completing her parental duties by arranging for his marriage. . . . God has given Hagar that right by treating her as the head of her own family and lineage.” In the honors and sympathy God bestows on Hagar at various times, we may see his great regard for all people and in turn the great regard we too should have for all people.

Reading with Hagar: We must recognize how precarious her place in the household became once Isaac was born. We must recognize her intense fear and anguish as she is exiled to the wilderness with her son and on the brink of death. We must also recognize how she felt when God saves her, and she becomes the free matriarch of her people



Sarah in Relation to Hagar

The name “Sarah” signifies a woman of rank or a princess, but the narrative does not depict her as a princess. . . .

“From a whole world perspective, I too am a princess, but that fact is often hard to remember. I do not come from a wealthy family by First World Standards, yet I have never known a time without food or shelter. . . . By first world standards, I am far from a “princess.” From a global perspective, however, I stand in the top 5 percent.” (62).

“I cannot and must not speak as if my view is normative. My view of the world is definitely colored by my life in the First World” (62). Beth LaNeel Tanner “My Sister Sarah: On Being a Woman in the First World,” Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World, 60-72



How are we exploiting others from our position?



“As we in principle side with Hagar in her plight, we may unwittingly in our actual behavior be siding with Sarah” (19)

What is a responsible and just way to deal with power and privilege?

How can we be in solidarity with one another?

As disciples of Christ, we are to remember & aid the marginalized



James 1:27 Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

Mosiah 4:26 And now, for the sake of these things which I have spoken unto you—that is, for the sake of retaining a remission of your sins from day to day, that ye may walk guiltless before God—I would that ye should impart of your substance to the poor, every man according to that which he hath, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their wants.

Hagar should remind us that even as we seek justice, we must be careful not to do it as the expense of others, especially those whose position in society is more marginal than our own.

