

# Hagar

TEXT: Genesis 21:8-21

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on June 25, 2023*

There are only four places in the Bible that mention Abraham's second wife, Hagar. Two of them have significant and somewhat difficult stories about her—Genesis 16 and the passage Pam just read from Genesis 21. The third place is just a mention of her name in a genealogy, and the final place is in Paul's letter to the Galatians, which I'll circle back to at the end.

I'm not sure "sermon" is the right word for this—we're going to do a bit of comparative religion and pull back to realize that, when we read stories in the Bible and try to decide what God might be saying to us in them, the context includes pulling waaaaay back to look not just at the story itself, and what's around it, but at who is telling it and why. The storyteller is never an impartial actor.

So we're going to join Hagar for a trip across three religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—to look at the similarities and differences in the way her story is told and interpreted.

Those three religions are broadly known as the Abrahamic religions or People of the Book, because the Hebrew Bible is a sacred, or at least divinely inspired, text for all three religions. All three find a common ancestor in Abraham—a biological ancestor in the case of Judaism and Islam and an ancestor in faith for Christians. So, let's dive in.

Remember back a few weeks to Genesis 12, where we first meet Abraham. His name at that point was merely Abram, which means "exalted father," but despite being 75 years old and married, he and his wife Sarai had no children, which was not for want of trying.

By Genesis 16, another 11 years have gone by and Abram and Sarai have still not been able to have children. Abram has become quite wealthy, and we'll get to the source of that wealth in a bit, but there is a lot of concern about who will inherit it and fulfill the promise God makes to Abram in Genesis 12 to have all the families of the earth be blessed through his offspring.

Having an heir was critically important in ancient cultures for a variety of reasons, so ancient cultures developed solutions for this kind of problem, one of which was that a man could have more than one wife. Wives couldn't have more than one husband, mind you, but that's a topic for another day. A man with more than one wife would have a better shot at producing an heir.

There were also additional benefits to polygamy for the wealthy and politically connected that were true then and continued for millennia: Wives were a form of diplomacy. Kings and important families gave their daughters to other kings and important families as wives to make amends, to establish alliances, to seal treaties, and, to satisfy various other kinds of political needs.

King Solomon famously had 700 wives and another 300 concubines, which was not a sign of his lust, but of his wealth and influence throughout the known world. Women were property and were simply traded as assets or given as gifts for influence by those with power. I'll come back to this political use of women in a bit, since it intersects with Hagar's story.

When it came to the particular issue of needing to produce an heir, if your wealth included enslaved people, As Abram's did, the law allowed for the master to conceive a child with an enslaved woman and have that child be the legitimate heir of the father and be considered the legal child of the free woman of the house. That's what happens in Genesis 16.

Sarai had an Egyptian handmaid, and Genesis 16 accurately describes the practice when it says, “Sarai said to Abram, ‘You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.’ And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai... Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife.”

Hagar does conceive. And then the problems begin. Although it had been Sarai’s idea, and although any child born to Hagar and Abram would legally be considered Sarai’s child, Hagar’s pregnancy creates tensions.

Genesis 16 tells us that the minute Hagar conceives, “she looked with contempt on her mistress.” That could well have been true. It could also have been true that Hagar’s joy in conceiving just *felt* like contempt to Sarai, who was in a vulnerable place because of her own inability to have children. But whatever it was, Sarai complains to Abram about Hagar’s attitude and Abram tells her to deal with Hagar as she wishes.

Sarai then abuses Hagar until Hagar runs away. And here’s where the story gets more interesting. An angel shows up—not to Abram and Sarai with instruction on what to do next, but to Hagar, finding her by a spring of water in the wilderness, pregnant and alone.

The angel tells Hagar to go back to Abram and Sarai and then says, “I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for the multitude... Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction.” The name Ishmael means “God hears.” But that’s not all.

What comes next earned Hagar the title of “The woman who named God.” Genesis 16:13 says, “So she named the Lord who spoke to her, ‘You are El-roi’ for she said, ‘Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?’” The exact meaning of “El-roi” is uncertain, but means something like “the God who sees.”

Hagar obeys the angel, goes back home, has the baby, and Abram names him Ishmael. In Muslim tradition, Ishmael is considered the ancestor of the Arab and Bedouin peoples and, more specifically, of the prophet Muhammad.

In the next chapter, Genesis 17, God changes Abram’s name to Abraham—which alters the name’s meaning from “exalted father” to “ancestor of a multitude.” Sarai’s name is changed to Sarah in the same chapter. God tells Abraham that he will bless Sarah and that she will bear a son with Abraham and that his name shall be Isaac. The name “Isaac” means laughter, which is what both Abraham and Sarah do when God tells them they’re going to have a son together at age 90 for Sarah and 100 for Abraham.

Abraham not only laughs, he actually advocates with God for Ishmael in chapter 17, basically saying, “Wouldn’t it be easier if you just continue with Ishmael as my heir?” God reassures Abraham that he has good things in store for Ishmael. God says in chapter 17 verse 20, “As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.”

But the plan for Sarah to have Isaac moves ahead with God’s promise that Isaac and his descendants will be the ones to carry the covenant forward. There’s a lot more there about Abraham and Sarah and the promise of Isaac, but we’re focused on Hagar and Ishmael, who aren’t brought up again until chapter 21. You’ve heard that passage this morning.

In the biblical timeline, Ishmael is now a teenager and we find him in chapter 21 playing with his new baby brother, Isaac. This rankles Sarah, who wants to make sure that it is her new baby and not Ishmael who gets the inheritance. She again goes to Abraham to do something. With some reluctance, Abraham gives Hagar and Ishmael bread and water and sends them away, and the camera moves to the scene of mother and son wandering in the wilderness with dwindling rations.

When the skin of water runs out, Hagar lies Ishmael down in the shade of a bush and weeps. The text implies that Hagar may have been carrying Ishmael, and since he's about 17 here, Jewish interpreters believe he may have been acutely ill. Cue another angel—again, not to make more promises to Abraham and Sarah, but to help Hagar.

The angel tells her it will be okay and that God's promise to her and Ishmael still holds. At that, she suddenly sees a well. A rabbinic version has the angel's wings touching the ground where a spring of water gushes forth. But they are given what they need to go on and start a new life in a new place. Eventually Hagar gets a wife for Ishmael from Egypt.

And now a message from one of our sponsors—the religion of Islam.

Many of you probably know that every year there is a huge pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca, where millions of Muslims go each year to perform Hajj. It takes five days with an optional sixth day. As part of that ritual, on day one, pilgrims circle the Kaaba—a silk-covered, stone structure at the center of the Grand Mosque—seven times and then run between the surrounding Safa and Marwa hills. It's a physically demanding ritual, especially in the heat of Saudi Arabia. Why do they do that?

The circling of the Kaaba and running between the hills happen on day 1 of the pilgrimage because that's where the Muslim journey begins. The story of Genesis 21 has some important additions in Muslim tradition.

We can see, even in the Hebrew Bible, that Abraham is not as ready to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael as Sarah is, and he gets up early to make sure they are sent off with provisions. In Muslim tradition, Abraham actually accompanies Hagar and Ishmael for some distance and leaves them—with the food and water—at Mecca, later returning to the spot to build the commemorative stone structure, now called the Kaaba, with his son.

Islam's version of the story also has a telling conversation between Abraham and Hagar when he leaves them at Mecca. In that version, Hagar asks Abraham, "Has God commanded you to do this?" Abraham says yes—an answer that squares with Genesis 21. Hagar then responds, "Then God will not cause us to be lost." This is taken as a sign of Hagar's faith and to Muslims she is known as the Mother of Monotheism.

And what about all the running between the two sets of hills during day 1 of Hajj? That part is acting out Hagar's desperate search for water, running between the hills where there might be a well or a stream, before giving up, putting Ishmael in the shade of a bush and weeping. Day one of the Hajj pilgrimage is all about Muslim origins in the stories of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael in Mecca, where Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael all stood, and the city where Ishmael's descendant, the prophet Muhammad, would be born some 2500 years later.

Another point worth investigating is how Sarai ended up with an Egyptian handmaid and how Abram got so wealthy. For a likely scenario, we turn to an unsavory incident in the second half of Genesis 12, as Abram and Sarai are looking for their new home base and find themselves in the midst of a famine in Canaan.

The famine sends them south, to the lush Nile delta of Egypt, as refugees. But, before they cross the border, Abram acknowledges some grim realities to Sarai. She is beautiful, refugees have few if any rights, and as soon as they cross the border, the Egyptians are almost certain to kill him and take her.

However, if they pretend that Sarai is Abram's sister rather than his wife, they'll still take Sarai, but they won't kill Abram, since a brother could legitimately give his sister away. And that's what happens, except that it isn't just any old Egyptian who takes Sarai, but Pharaoh himself.

Since Abram is supposedly Sarai's brother, Pharaoh compensates him well for this beautiful new addition to the royal harem. Genesis 12:16 says Abram is given, "sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, female donkeys, and camels." But things start to go badly for Pharaoh—enough so that he believes he is cursed. In trying to find out why he would be cursed, Pharaoh discovers that Sarai is actually Abram's wife and not his sister.

Another king might have killed Abram for the deception, but Pharaoh thinks, if God is cursing me for an innocent mistake regarding this woman, God must be on Abram's side. So Pharaoh decides the best course of action is to give Sarai back to Abram, let them keep all the gifts, and just get them out of here.

The gift of female slaves from the house of Pharaoh is the assumption, in at least some quarters of all three religions, of how Sarai ends up with an Egyptian handmaid. The name "Hagar" in Hebrew means "this is the reward," so it's a scenario that makes sense on a couple of levels. But there's more.

In Islamic tradition, as well as in some rabbinic traditions, Hagar wasn't just a servant at the court, but was actually Pharaoh's daughter. What that addition to the story does is put an exclamation point on the greatness of Abraham. He's not just given those who are already enslaved in Pharaoh's court, Abram is elevated to someone on a similar level as Pharaoh, who gives his own daughter to make amends and hopefully satisfy both Abram and his god, who seems pretty upset.

As Pharaoh says in one Jewish midrash, "It would be better for my daughter to be a handmaiden in this house [that is, Abram's house] than a noblewoman in another." Hagar as Pharaoh's daughter also further raises the level of respect due to Hagar and her eventual offspring.

While we might expect that from the Islamic versions, it's notable that many Jewish interpretations also shine a light of reverence and respect on Hagar. Some rabbis continue her story to say that she remained faithful to Abraham after being cast out and that, after Sarah's death, Hagar comes back to him. Some even believe the returned Hagar is the same woman the Bible names Keturah, who Abraham married after Sarah's death in Genesis 25, and with whom he had six sons.

Rabbinic tradition doesn't treat Ishmael as well as they do Hagar. For them, the reason Sarai doesn't want Ishmael playing with Isaac is because Ishmael is evil and a bad influence. But even so, there are stories in Judaism of not only Hagar returning to Abraham, but Ishmael coming back, too—a penitent, to be sure, and giving up those other nations God promised to him, but coming back to Abraham in the end.

While you could wish that Ishmael would not have to repent of the blessings God promised and then gave him, at least those traditions *want* both Hagar and Ishmael back in the Jewish fold. And Hagar is admired across the board, even when Ishmael is not.

Christians, however, manage to disparage both Islam and Judaism in the way we treat Hagar and Ishmael, a failing I lay at the feet of Paul in his letter to the Galatians. As you know, I often come to Paul's defense, and I'm grateful for the book of Galatians, which brings us the inspired verse that says, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

But Paul was a man not a god, and he was not writing his letters with the thought of them becoming sacred scripture. Every letter has an agenda, and the agenda in Galatians is to make a theological case for why Gentiles don't have to become Jews in order to join the followers of Jesus and how Gentiles, too, can be considered children of Abraham.

Paul is writing to the church in Galatia with urgency, as Peter and the Jerusalem church are hammering him on every side to make Gentiles have to be circumcised and become Jews before they can be part of the church. Chapter 1 shows us a very angry Paul as Peter and others are trying to undermine his efforts at Gentile inclusion, even in the predominantly Gentile churches Paul has founded.

To make his case to the church in Galatia, Paul reframes the followers of Jesus—Jew and Gentile alike—as a spiritual body connected by faith, rather than as a physical body connected by bodily characteristics like circumcision, which has been the point of contention. Good point. I'm with him. That concept is what lets him say

that it doesn't matter whether you are Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, and all the rest. The connective tissue is faith, which transcends all those boundaries.

Where he loses me is not in the concept, but in the way he then turns the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar into an allegory to illustrate his point. He sets up binary choices of law and faith, flesh and spirit and then makes Hagar and Ishmael the representatives of law and flesh and Sarah and Isaac the representatives of faith and spirit with the result that Hagar equals bad and Sarah equals good.

Now Paul doesn't know how the story of Hagar and Ishmael will continue to play out. The Prophet Muhammad isn't born for another 500 years. The religion of Islam does not yet exist. But the binary frames he creates for the story set the stage for persecution and war. Ironically, Paul, the Jewish Pharisee, also gives a big push toward antisemitism as he says in Galatians 4:24-26,

“One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the other woman [and by that he means Sarah] corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother.”

And then, after quoting from Isaiah, he says in verses 29-31, “But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. But what does the scripture say? ‘Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman.’ So then, friends, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman.” Yikes.

In just those few verses, Paul sets up not only a rationale for the persecution of Jews by Christians but also for the Crusades once the actual descendants of Hagar and Ishmael show up on the scene with their own prophet's take on the God of Abraham.

The early church fathers ran with Paul's allegory as the true meaning of the conflict between Sarah and Hagar which eliminated all the nuance in the stories and made Hagar represent the bad and Sarah the good. No wonder I have never heard a positive word about Hagar in the church!

The stories of Abraham are at least 4,000 years old, and whether he was an actual person or several people whose stories got blended into one across time is not a question that interests me. What does interest me is how the way we tell stories about our origins, our faith, and the differences of others can shape life and history for a very, very, very long time.

I wish I had been given a different frame for the life of Hagar much earlier in my life. It can be hard to follow because it's scattered across many chapters and all the sermons I ever heard were focused on “Wow! A 90-year-old woman had a baby! What a miracle!”

Sure, Abraham and Sarah are important. But when Hagar and Ishmael were in trouble, angels rushed to their aid. Twice. God heaped great blessings on an Egyptian handmaid and her son, and promised greatness to their descendants.

What if Christians had paid more attention to that part of the story? What if Paul had gone to his own Jewish tradition of midrash and imagined a version of the story where Ishmael and Isaac were allowed to continue to play and live together as brothers instead of devising an allegory focused on the command to “Drive out the slave and her child?” What might today's world look like then? Amen.