

Genesis 16-17

Man's Ways vs. God's Timing

Introduction

In the accounts of chapters 16 and 17 of Genesis we have very contrasting pictures of how human beings attempt to bring about God's will and the mess that we often introduce versus God's ability to accomplish His will despite us. However, these accounts also show us His grace and faithfulness to us in the midst of the troubles we face.

Birth of Ishmael – 16:1-16

Sarai & Hagar – vs. 1-6

Vs. 1-2 introduce the narrative of chapter 16. It presents the situation that Sarai remains barren. It is documented in texts from the 1st and 2nd millennium that it was customary and perhaps even required for a barren wife to procure a surrogate for her husband to produce children. God's promises to date had not specified that she was to be the mother represented by the promise, and in fact, she would have attributed fertility as a specific blessing from God. The fact that He had so far withheld that perhaps looked like a sign to them, and this would have seemed to be a reasonable option in that day. Later in Genesis, Rachel and Leah also resort to this practice. However, as will be seen, man's attempts to fulfill God's promises via our own means and via the world's wisdom without consulting Him can often produce unfortunate consequences as it does here. It is interesting to note, that they refrained from using a Canaanite servant, but chose Hagar, an Egyptian, no doubt acquired during their sojourn in Egypt.

In verses 3-6, the details of that decision and its consequences are described. We learn that it is now 10 years that Abram has been in Canaan and he would now be about 85 and Sarai 75. They have been waiting for some time for God's provision and impatience has led to taking matters into their own hands. Sarai officially gives Hagar to Abram as a "wife." The word here is "wife" and not "concubine" has used elsewhere in the O.T., but the role appears to be that of a concubine. Abram proceeds to sleep with Hagar, and she promptly conceives (undoubtedly to some chagrin to Sarai). While Hagar may not have had any choice in this arrangement, it is clear she is pleased with this result. She is now the mother of the heir apparent, and perhaps began to imply that she is better than Sarai as she is able to conceive when Sarai was not (certainly rubbing salt in an open wound). Hagar perhaps senses the possibility of taking the place of her mistress or having the right to (cf. Prov 30:21-23 acknowledgement of this very human problem).

Sarai, even though this was her idea, now feels a tension and anger she did not anticipate. In vs 5, she blames Abram for her predicament. He was undoubtedly delighted that he would now be a father and perhaps Sarai viewed that as encouraging Hagar's prideful behavior and turned to him to put Hagar in her place. In vs. 6, however, Abram abdicates from that responsibility to Sarai which only leads to more trouble. Sarai is now free to vent her ire and mistreats her servant to the extent that Hagar is forced to flee. The word for mistreat is the same as the one used to describe the Egyptian treatment of the Israelite slaves before the Exodus. This is an interesting parallel in reverse, with the matriarch of the Israelites mistreating her Egyptian slave.

God & Hagar – vs. 7-16

The next section (vs. 7) starts off with the angel of the LORD finding Hagar by a spring on the way to Shur indicating that she is likely on her way home to Egypt although she does not confirm that to the angel. Based on the description, she is likely about 70 miles from Abram's household, having traveled about a week, pregnant and alone. According to Hamilton¹, the nuance of that word implies that the angel was looking for her and did not just stumble upon her. It is interesting to note that the angel of the Lord is actively seeking out an Egyptian woman, and the only communication of God in this chapter is to Hagar, not to Abram or Sarai. It illustrates the breadth of

¹ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids Michigan, 1990

care He has for all humankind. She may not know who YAHWEH is, but He becomes a personal deity to her. This is the first mention in the Bible of the “angel of the LORD.” Commentators disagree as to whether this is simply a messenger from God or a manifestation of God Himself. He speaks in both the first person and third person in reference to God. Regardless, the message itself is clearly from YAHWEH to Hagar.

In vs. 8, the angel first addresses her with a question that he clearly knows the answer to in vs. 10-12. She replies where she came from, withholding where she was planning to go. Why the question? Perhaps to lessen any fear she might have felt in his presence. It is a gentler approach. The angel commands her to return and “submit” to her mistress – put herself back under Sarai’s authority. However, along with this perhaps unwelcome divine command, comes a divine promise. She is the only woman in the Bible to receive such a promise with its covenantal overtones.

In vs. 11, it is repeated for a 3rd time that the angel spoke to her, emphasizing this revelation to her. Vs. 11-12 are similar to the patriarchal pronouncements later in Genesis. It begins with the birth pronouncement and Hagar learns now that she is to have a son and is to call him Ishmael as a memorial to God’s attention to her affliction even if called to go back and endure it. This should mean something to the future enslaved Israelites in Egypt. The birth pronouncement is followed by a rather derogatory description of the future of this people, the Ishmaelites. They would become a nomadic, Bedouin people in the wilderness surrounded by belligerent neighbors.

Hagar’s response in vs. 13-14 is to focus not on the message, but on the source of the message – this amazing deity that has appeared and spoken to her, one that is aware of who she is and what she is going through. This must make all the difference to her as it enables her to return to a difficult situation. The naming of the place (*Beer-lahai-roi* means “the well of the Living One who sees me”) also recognizes her amazement at this encounter.

The section concludes similarly to how it began with a simple description of the final situation. Hagar does return and gives birth to a son whom Abram names. It is significant that Abram names him as this shows his recognition of this child as his son. Also note that while Hagar is mentioned 3 times and Abram 4 times, Sarai is absent. The other significant note for the next chapter is that Abram is now 86 years old when Ishmael is born.

Sign of the Covenant – 17:1-27

As chapter 17 opens, we have jumped ahead 13 years and Abram is now 99 years old! The LORD appears to him again. Abram might well have thought that everything was all set at this point. He now has a son. But now again the LORD appears to him and the details of the covenant are further advanced. The chapter includes 5 speeches of God with two now including requirements of Abram, and the others reiterating God’s commitment to bless him and his offspring. It is interesting how God has revealed more and more to Abraham as time has gone on rather than all at once as if to reflect Abram’s deepening relationship with God through time. The details of the covenant are the focus here with the word “covenant” appearing 13 times in this chapter (it only occurred once in chapter 15). 7 instances occur in the promises while 6 are in the speech on circumcision. New and different here are new covenantal requirements of Abraham, but also new details on the promises as well.

In His first speech to Abram in vs. 1-2, the new title of “God Almighty” (El Shaddai) is used in place of YAHWEH reflecting His power and might to accomplish his will. This is now followed with the command to “Walk before me and be blameless.” The language of *walk before me* “expresses the service or devotion of a faithful servant to his king”². “Blameless,” used as a description of Noah, is now to be a goal of Abram. This is not the first imperative, but the first with an ethical nuance. What this means is clarified with the institution of circumcision as a sign of this covenant later in the chapter. The goal is so that God will continue to bless him and multiply him greatly as stated previously. In response, for the first time, Abram now falls on his face in worship.

In vs. 3a-8 is the second speech and new details are revealed. Abram will no longer have a multitude of descendants, but he will also be a father of *a multitude of nations*. This begins to reveal the universality of this covenant for *nation* refers to *goyim* and thus other nations besides his descendants. And it is **at this point** that his name is changed from Abram (“exalted father”) to Abraham (“father of a multitude”). Thus, the name of “Abraham” really reflects his future role of the father of all the faithful from every nation not just those descended from him! It is his name as **our** father in the faith. God continues with his promise to make him exceedingly

² Ibid

fruitful and not just the father of nations, but of kings from those nations! The final new aspect to this covenant is that it is *everlasting* between God and Abraham's offspring (*all his offspring*) both to be God to them and to give the land as an *everlasting* possession. This is not a temporary promise that will end at some point, but is open ended. This covenant will be *established* by God Almighty himself – by his power and might it will be accomplished.

In the third speech (vs. 9-14), “you” is mostly second person *plural*. He is not only addressing Abraham but all his descendants and their households *throughout your generations*. It is a requirement to for all males in the household at 8 days to be circumcised as a sign of this covenant. Note that this comes after the covenant has already been made, and is not a requirement for the covenant to be established in the first place, but failure to follow it will break the covenant. Thus, to be “blameless”, to do as God requires, is to be circumcised as a sign of this covenant. Hamilton³ makes an interesting note that this sign is not one that is typically visible. The benefit is not to prove to others that you are a member of this covenantal community, but would serve more as a reminder to yourself of this covenant that God is your God and you believe God's promises even as Abraham did. This requirement is sandwiched between God's promises showing that requirements are to be interpreted within this context of promise.

The last two speeches (vs. 15-21) now move to the promise of a specific son, Isaac. The first speech regards the change of Sarai's name to Sarah (“princess”). The change of name is not explained, but represents a change of status. She will now be *blessed*, and a son given to Abraham by her. Blessing throughout Genesis includes the blessing “to be fruitful and multiply”, but until now as reported in the previous chapter, this blessing has been withheld from Sarai. But now she will be “Sarah” and blessed with fertility. Also, like Abraham, she will be the matriarch of *nations* and *kings will come from her*. Abraham keeps this to himself as she does not find out until a later chapter. Instead, vs. 17 indicates that he is skeptical of this part of the promise and perhaps that explains his reticence in sharing this with Sarah as he does not quite believe it himself! In vs. 18, Abraham's pragmatism and no doubt his love for his existing son, Ishmael, leads him to propose Ishmael as the son of promise.

In vs. 19-22, God makes his final speech and reiterates that it will be a son of Sarah, whose name shall be Isaac, through whom the covenant will be fulfilled. Ishmael will not be forgotten and will be blessed, but the covenant will be through Isaac. And finally, the waiting will be over for he will be born in the next year!

In vs. 22-27, Abraham indeed fulfills what is required of him and is circumcised along with his son Ishmael and the entire household. Once again, the text emphasizes the age of Abraham at 99 and the age of Ishmael at 13.

³ Ibid