

The Story of Origins

Genesis Chapters 16 to 19

February 15, 2012

Readings for the day:

<p>Genesis: Chapter 16 Chapter 17 Chapter 18</p> <p>God never abandons anyone</p> <p>Abram and Sarai remain childless (v. 1). Sarai and Abraham think they can help God out so that God can fulfill his promises to them. According to ancient custom, a barren wife could give her female servant/maid to her husband as kind of a surrogate mother in order to have children. So Sarai sends Hagar to Abram (vv. 2-3). When Hagar becomes pregnant she belittles Sarai for her barrenness. Abram does not get involved in the struggle between the two women. So Sarai drives Hagar away seemingly so that Hagar's child will not be Abram's heir.</p>	<p>But God will not abandon Hagar. She names God El-roi, which means God of seeing, for God has seen her plight, and the place where God's messenger appeared to her she names Beer-lahairoi, which means "the well of the living God who sees me." The angel of the Lord then sends her back to Sarai and promises that she will have descendants too numerous to count (w. 7-10).</p> <p>The promise made to Hagar sounds like the promise to Abram. But her son Ishmael will struggle against everyone (w. 11-12). Regardless of conflict there is still a gift because God has both spoken to Hagar and made promises to her. The relationship between God and Hagar is as intimate as that between God and Abram. Her son Ishmael will, in his own right, become the father of many children. He will be a faithful son of Abram and the bearer of his own promise (21:18; 25:9).</p>
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This Week at Home:

We will be doing partial readings at our Wednesday sessions but to really get to know Isaiah I suggest you do these longer readings at home.

<p>Day 1 "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" GENESIS 16:13 READ Chapter 16 Reflection What do I do when God's plans for me seem on hold? Prayer Starter: God of many names, you always see us. Help us always to see you</p>
<p>Day 2 "I will establish my covenant...for an everlasting covenant." GENESIS 17:7-8 READ Chapter 17 Reflection: When have I laughed at the extravagance of God's promise? Prayer Starter: God of all blessedness, help me to rejoice in the many blessings you give me. Show these to me daily so I can better know and believe in you.</p>
<p>Day 3 "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" GENESIS 18:14 READ Chapters 18 and 19 Reflection: Is anything too difficult for God to do with me and for me? Prayer Starter: Forgiving God, save us from the consequences of our sins, forgive us and teach us to forgive one another.</p>

Foot Notes

CH 16 [7] The LORD'S messenger: a manifestation of God in human form; therefore in Genesis 16:13 the messenger is identified with the Lord himself.

[11] Ishmael: in Hebrew the name means "God has heard."

[13] The God of Vision: In Hebrew, el-roi; hence the name of the spring. Remained alive: for the ancient notion that a person died on seeing God, cf Genesis 32:31; Exodus 20:19; Deut 4:33; Judges 13:22.

[14] Beer-lahai-roi: probably "the well of living sight," i.e., the well where one can see (God) and yet live.

Some relationships last forever

The narrative of the covenant between God and Abram is one story told in two versions. **(Chapter 17)** is the version of the Priestly source for the book of Genesis; chapter 15 of the Yahwist source, (see notes "The Book of Genesis,") God promises land and descendants. God also promises an everlasting relationship with Abram. Abram is to walk blamelessly before God (v. 1); and God will always be his God (v. 7). As a result the identity of both God and Abram are transformed. This is done by name changing: Abram (which means "exalted ancestor") will now be called Abraham (meaning "ancestor of a multitude").

Like the covenant with Noah, which has the sign of the rainbow, God's covenant with Abraham has a sign: circumcision (w. 10-11). The covenant is so profoundly life changing that it is cut into the very flesh of the participants (v. 13).

God does not leave Sarai, Abraham's wife, out of the promises. Her life too has been changed and she receives a new name, Sarah (v. 15). God promises to bless her and to make her the mother of nations (v. 16). Further, God declares that the child of the promise will be a son of both Abraham and Sarah. Abraham's response is convulsive laughter (v. 17). Regardless, God reaffirms the promise and names the child Isaac, which means "he laughs" (v. 19).

In obedience to and as a sign of this covenant with God, Abraham, his son Ishmael, and his entire male household are circumcised (w. 23-27). They all now carry the sign of God's covenant on their bodies.

Hospitality is always important

The first fifteen verses of **chapter 18** are a birth announcement. They announce the birth of Isaac. "Three men" come to Abraham (v. 2); two will turn out to be angels, and one is God himself. Abraham welcomes them with Bedouin hospitality and, being the perfect host, he provides water for the washing of their feet and he tells them that they will be doing him a favor if they accept a little food from him (w. 3-5). The little food turns out to be a banquet (w. 6-8). One of the men tells Abraham that he will have a son within a year, and it is Sarah who laughs at the thought (w. 10-12). But nothing is impossible with God. God can fill barren wombs.

When the guests leave, God tells Abraham that he intends to destroy the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their sinfulness. Abraham argues with God saying he risks destroying the innocent along with the guilty. Abraham appeals to God's sense of justice and starts haggling with God to save the towns.

The conversation is a wonderful example of Near Eastern haggling. Such bargaining occurs daily even today in Jerusalem's markets. Just ask anyone who has been to the Holy Land. Abraham begins with fifty innocent people and talks God down to ten (w. 26-32). Unfortunately there aren't even ten.

The conversation reveals several important things. First, it encourages us to be bold with God, to dare to argue with God. Second, it demonstrates the power of intercessory prayer, inviting us to pray even for those we may not like.

Foot Notes:

CH 17 [1] The Almighty: traditional but incorrect rendering of the divine title shaddai, of uncertain meaning.

[5] Abram and Abraham are merely two forms of the same name, both meaning, "the father is exalted"; another variant form is Abiram (Numbers 16:1; 1 Kings 16:34). The additional -ha- in the form Abraham is explained by folk etymology as coming from ab-hamon goyim, "father of a host of nations."

[15] Sarai and Sarah are variant forms of the same name, both meaning "princess."

[17] Laughed: yishaq, which is the Hebrew form of the name "Isaac"; other similar explanations of the name are given in Genesis 18:12 and 21:6.

CH 18 [20] Israelite tradition was unanimous in ascribing the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah to the wickedness of these cities, but tradition varied in regard to the nature of this wickedness. According to the present account of the Yahwist, the sin of Sodom was homosexuality (Genesis 19:4-5), which is therefore also known as sodomy; but according to Isaiah (Isaiah 1:9-10; 3:9), it was a lack of social justice; Ezekiel (Ezekiel 16:46-51) described it as a disregard for the poor, whereas Jeremiah (Jeremiah 23:14) saw it as general immorality.