



CLOUD OF WITNESSES

SARAH and HAGAR

Women of Promise

Irene Nowell



*A ministry of the Diocese of Little Rock
in partnership with Liturgical Press*

Nihil obstat: Jerome Kodell, O.S.B., *Censor Librorum.*

Imprimatur: † Anthony B. Taylor, Bishop of Little Rock, April 6, 2016.

Cover design by Ann Blattner. Cover photo: Lightstock. Used with permission.

Photos/illustrations: Page 6, *Abraham and Sarah at the Birth of Isaac*, by Marc Chagall, 1887. Pages 8 (The Code of Hammurabi), 12, 15, 31, and 35, Thinkstock Images by Getty. Page 10, Icon of Abraham and Sarah (detail). Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons. Page 16, Abraham detail from a window at Saint Vitus Cathedral, Prague. Photo by Gene Plaisted, OSC, © The Crosiers. Used with permission. Page 20, Tomb of Sarah in Hebron. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons. Page 27, *Abraham's Counsel to Sarah*, by James Tissot. Jewish Museum, New York. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons. Page 34, Icon of Abraham's Visitors (*Trinity*), by Andrei Rublyov, 1425. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Scripture texts, prefaces, introductions, footnotes, and cross-references used in this work are taken from the *New American Bible, revised edition* © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, DC and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

© 2016 by Little Rock Scripture Study, Little Rock, Arkansas. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the written permission of the copyright holder. Published by Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota 56321. Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN: 978-0-8146-3618-3 (print); 978-0-8146-4627-4 (ebook)

Contents

Introduction 4

Sarah and Hagar 6

The Blessing of Sarah's Fertility 16

The Lord Visits the Dwelling in Mamre 27

Introduction

Alive in the Word brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited to you.

- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session in order to adequately work through each chapter.

- **For a parish-wide event or use within a larger group,** provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the event for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she learned.

This volume explores the theme of **A Cloud of Witnesses**. The pages of our Bibles are filled with the stories of women and men who have played a unique role in salvation history. By entering into a few key biblical passages written by or describing these people, we begin to see how our own story continues God's great work of salvation in the world. Their witness, handed on to us from centuries ago, continues to speak to us and challenge us to stand as faithful witnesses in today's world.

Sarah and Hagar



Begin by asking God to assist you in your prayer and study. Then read through Genesis 16:1-10, our introduction to Sarah and her husband Abraham.

Genesis 16:1-10

¹Abram's wife Sarai had borne him no children. Now she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar. ²Sarai said to Abram: "The LORD has kept me from bearing children. Have intercourse with my maid; perhaps I will have sons through her." Abram obeyed Sarai. ³Thus, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, his wife Sarai took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife. ⁴He had intercourse with her, and she became pregnant. As soon as Hagar knew she was pregnant, her mistress lost stature in her eyes. ⁵So Sarai said to Abram: "This outrage against me is your fault. I myself gave my maid to your embrace; but ever since she knew she was pregnant, I have lost stature in her eyes. May the LORD decide between you and me!" ⁶Abram told Sarai: "Your maid is in your power. Do to her what you regard as right." Sarai then mistreated her so much that Hagar ran away from her.

⁷The LORD's angel found her by a spring in the wilderness, the spring on the road to Shur, ⁸and he asked, "Hagar, maid of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She answered, "I am running away from my mistress, Sarai." ⁹But the LORD's angel told her: "Go back to your mistress and submit to her authority. ¹⁰I will make your descendants so numerous," added the LORD's angel, "that they will be too many to count."

Setting the Scene

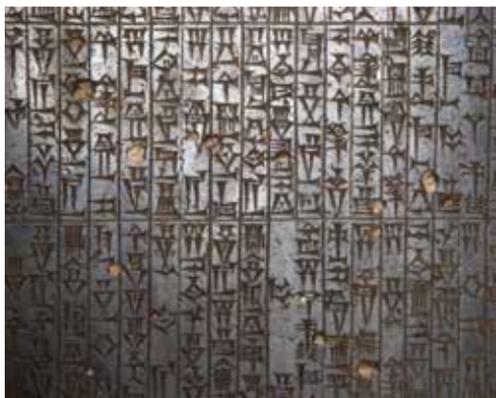
Two women are the main characters in this scene. The first is Sarai (Sarah), wife of Abram (Abraham). She appears first as part of a genealogy introducing Abraham and his family. The father of every person in this genealogy is named except for Sarah. The only information given is that she is the wife of Abraham and that she has no child (Gen 11:27-30). As the story progresses she will travel with Abraham wherever God calls him. She will also be pawned off to Pharaoh as his sister, but God protects her (Gen 12:11-20). Technically Abraham is correct even though he intends to deceive Pharaoh. "Sister" (Hebrew *'achoth*) is a common term for "wife" in the Old Testament (see Song 4:9-10; 5:1; Tob 5:21; 7:15). Also in a later incident where he makes the same claim he says Sarah is his "father's daughter, not [his] mother's" (Gen 20:12). This kind of relationship will later be forbidden (see Deut 27:22).

The reader is reminded frequently that Sarah has no child. Her barrenness is a major problem, because God has promised Abraham twice that he will be the ancestor of a great nation, living in their own land, with descendants as many as the stars (Gen 12:2; 15:5). It was also commonly believed in the ancient world that the lack of children was due to the wife's barrenness, not the husband's infertility.

The other woman is Hagar, Sarah's maid-servant. Hagar is an Egyptian, which leads to the question: was Hagar one of the female servants that Pharaoh gave Abraham after the incident when he claimed Sarah was his sister (Gen 12:16)? Sarah will use Hagar to solve her problem of barrenness. In the ancient world it was not uncommon for maids to be used as surrogate mothers. A man needed sons so his line would be preserved. There was no clear belief in life after death at the time of Abraham, so the only way a person lived on was through children, especially sons. If God is going to be faithful to Abraham regarding the covenant promises, there must be sons. It seems

impossible that he will beget sons through Sarah, so the maid will be called upon to provide.

The relationship between Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham now becomes ambiguous. In the ancient law codes the child conceived by the maid is regarded as the son of



Code of Hammurabi

the wife. According to the code of Hammurabi (eighteenth century BC), the maid or slave cannot consider herself a second wife and does not have the same legal rights as the wife. So according to this law and custom Sarah should be considered the mother of Hagar's son. Another complication arises, however, from the title given to Hagar. In Genesis 16:3 she is called Abraham's "wife" (Hebrew *'ishshah*), not a maid or concubine (Hebrew *pilegesh*). For a man to have more than one wife was also accepted in the ancient world. So is Hagar now a surrogate mother and is her son really Sarah's? Or is she a second wife with her own rights? The biblical text does not clarify.

The entire passage will be considered a few verses at a time. The occasional questions in the margin are for discussion with others. If you are using these materials on your own, use the questions for personal reflection or as a guide to journaling.

Understanding the Scene Itself

¹Abram's wife Sarai had borne him no children. Now she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar. ²Sarai said to Abram: "The LORD has kept me from bearing children. Have intercourse with my maid; perhaps I will have sons through her." Abram obeyed Sarai.

The initial conversation between Abraham and Sarah seems both friendly and practical. We have no sons, so do what ancient Mesopotamian law recommends: use your maid as a surrogate



mother. It is noteworthy that the suggestion is made, not by Abraham, but by Sarah. Sarah also observes that it is the Lord who has prevented her from getting pregnant and bearing children. The whole mystery of how life begins and new human beings are conceived and born is in the hands of God. Human beings can take some action, but ultimately it is God who creates the new person. Sarah is well aware of this truth and so also lays the blame for her barrenness on God.

It is also noteworthy that Abraham obeys Sarah. There is a mutuality in the relationship between husband and wife. Sarah takes the initiative to propose a solution to their difficulty, and Abraham obeys her. Throughout this passage Sarah is the one in charge. Sarah also assumes at this point that the custom of using a maid as a surrogate mother will work to her advantage. She expects that the sons born to Hagar will be considered children of Sarah.

In what way are you able to relate to Sarah's predicament? Is there a situation in your life where you might both wait and take action?

³Thus, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, his wife Sarai took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife. ⁴He had intercourse with her, and she became pregnant. As soon as Hagar knew she was pregnant, her mistress lost stature in her eyes.

Trouble appears already in verse 3. Sarah takes action, as she and Abraham had agreed. But a subtle change in wording changes everything. Sarah gives Hagar to Abraham, but not as a surrogate mother. She gives Hagar to Abraham “to be his wife.” Hagar’s status has already been transformed. She is no longer a maid; she is a second wife. Now, according to ancient Near Eastern law and custom, she has rights that she did not have before. This situation is not going to work out well for Sarah.

Abraham impregnates Hagar promptly. This piece of news confirms the supposition that it is Sarah who is infertile, not Abraham. In just four Hebrew words Hagar has become the mother of Abraham’s child. Hagar realizes well that her status has changed. She sees herself as a second wife; she is the mother of the master’s son. Sarah, on the other hand, has lost status. Sarah is the older, barren, first wife who has no children. Hagar apparently loses no time in reminding her “former” mistress of this new situation.

⁵So Sarai said to Abram: “This outrage against me is your fault. I myself gave my maid to your embrace; but ever since she knew she was pregnant, I have lost stature in her eyes. May the LORD decide between you and me!” ⁶Abram told Sarai: “Your maid is in your power. Do to her what you regard as right.” Sarai then mistreated her so much that Hagar ran away from her.

The proverbial saying, “Be careful what you wish for or desire” could be applied to Sarah’s situation. When have your own plans had unintended or opposite effects? Any lessons learned?

Sarah blames Abraham for this distressing situation. In one sense she is right. Abraham has impregnated Hagar and fathered her child. But Sarah is the person who suggested this solution to their problem and who gave Hagar to Abraham “as a wife.” In her frustration Sarah has shifted all the responsibility to Abraham and now she calls on God to resolve the difficulty. Abraham, for his part, still insists that the responsibility and the power belong to Sarah. She can do whatever she wishes to her maid. Notice that Hagar is Sarah’s maid even as she is Abraham’s second wife. Sarah and Abraham both continue throughout the passage to call Hagar a maid (Gen 16:1 [2x], 2, 3, 5, 6, 8; Hebrew *shiph-hah*). Sarah then proceeds to drive Hagar away.

⁷The LORD’s angel found her by a spring in the wilderness, the spring on the road to Shur,⁸ and he asked, “Hagar, maid of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” She answered, “I am running away from my mistress,



Sarai.” ⁹But the LORD’s angel told her: “Go back to your mistress and submit to her authority. ¹⁰I will make your descendants so numerous,” added the LORD’s angel, “that they will be too many to count.”

For the first time in this passage, God takes an active part. Sarah accused the Lord of not giving her children but God made no response. Now that Hagar has run away from Sarah and Abraham, God comes in the form of an angel to comfort Hagar and to give her a significant message. God addresses Hagar by name and by status, maid of Sarah. Then God asks a very important question: “Where have you come from and where are you going?” Hagar shows no fear but responds honestly: “I am running away.” God, however, has other plans for Hagar and sends her back to the difficult situation. But God does not send her empty. God gives her the same promise that God has given Abraham: descendants so numerous that they will be impossible to count (see Gen 15:5).

God’s words to Hagar may be seen as an instruction to us too. Many times we need to stop and hear God’s question: “Where have you come from and where are you going?” Running away may seem to be a solution to conflict, but it rarely is. God may indeed be sending us back to face the situation. Having the courage to stop and listen to God is an initial step toward growth in our relationships to one another and to God. Hagar is our model here. As the passage continues, Hagar gives God a name: “You are God who

If there is a situation in your life that makes you feel justified in fleeing, are you prepared to stop, reflect, and listen before acting? What disciplines might help you face the situation with courage?

sees me” (Gen 16:13). She is the first person in Scripture to name God. The promise God has given her follows a repeated form of announcing the birth of an important son. The same form is used in the announcement to Mary of the birth of Jesus (Luke 1:29-38; see Luke 1:11-20). Hagar clearly is important to God.

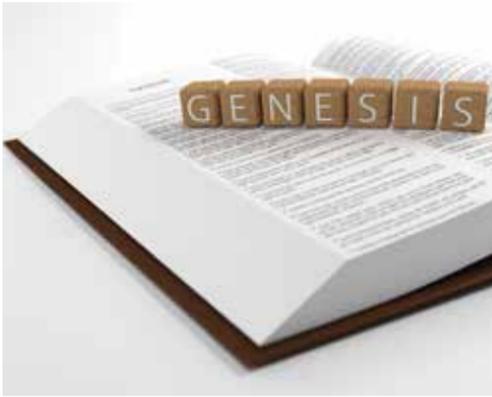
What about Sarah? She will be compelled to recognize Hagar’s worth and to accept Hagar’s son into the family. As Deuteronomy says:

If a man has two wives, one loved and the other unloved, and if both the loved and the unloved bear him sons, but the firstborn is the son of the unloved wife: when he comes to bequeath his property to his sons he may not consider as his firstborn the son of the wife he loves, in preference to the son of the wife he does not love, the firstborn. On the contrary, he shall recognize as his firstborn the son of the unloved wife, giving him a double share of whatever he happens to own, since he is the first fruits of his manhood, and to him belong the rights of the firstborn (Deut 21:15-17).

But Hagar’s return to Sarah will not result in reconciliation. The tension between the two women will only be heightened by further developments.

Praying the Word / Sacred Reading

Return to the full passage (Gen 16:1-10) and read it aloud. As you do so, what words or phrases



stand out to you? Jot down and use these words or phrases as a way to prayerfully consider that God might be catching your attention in a particular way or for a particular purpose at this time. Allow the words that “spoke to you” to become a springboard to you to speak to God. And be prepared to spend some time in silence listening for even a small still voice as God speaks to your heart.

Living the Word

Consider one of the following:

- Spend time with someone this week whose life circumstances make him or her vulnerable to the wishes and desires of others. Is there a Hagar in your midst?
- What descriptive name might you use for God that reflects your experience of God’s work in your life? Use this name for God in prayer this week.