

# OpenTheo

## January 16th: Genesis 16 & John 7:53—8:30

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Abram and Hagar; Jesus and the woman caught in adultery.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

Genesis 16. Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar.

And Sarai said to Abram, Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go into my servant. It may be that I shall obtain children by her.

And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. And he went into Hagar, and she conceived.

And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. And Sarai said to Abram, May the wrong done to me be on you. I gave my servant to your embrace.

And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me. But Abram said to Sarai, Behold, your servant is in your power.

Do to her as you please. And Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her. The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to shore.

And he said, Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going? She said, I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai. The angel of the Lord said to her, Return to your mistress and submit to her. The angel of the Lord also said to her, I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.

And the angel of the Lord said to her, Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the Lord has listened to your affliction. He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen.

So she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her. You are a God of seeing. For she said, Truly here have I seen him who looks after me.

Therefore the well was called Beel Ahiroi. It lies between Kadesh and Bered. And Hagar bore Abram a son.

And Abram called the name of his son whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was 86 years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram. Reading passages such as Genesis chapter 16, there are great rewards for paying attention.

The first thing to notice here is that Hagar is introduced to us as an Egyptian maidservant. We've already had one Egyptian experience in the story of Abraham back in chapter 12. He was in Egypt and Sarai was taken and in the house of Pharaoh.

Pharaoh was plagued and then he was sent away with many gifts, with sheep, ox and male donkeys, male and female servants, female donkeys and camels, etc. Presumably, Hagar was one of these female servants. So we've had an Egyptian experience and now there is another.

Presumably, one of the Egyptian maidservants received during that sojourn in Egypt is the main player within this particular chapter. And her nationality is significant where she comes from. She's first of all someone who has come from this particular earlier story but also there is an anticipation of later period in Israel's history where they will be the servant in the house of the Egyptians.

It is important to read this passage against the backdrop of the passage that immediately preceded it. Perhaps some of you as we're reading through that passage

noticed a pattern. Abraham brings together a number of animals and then he's placed into a deep sleep.

We've seen that pattern before. In Genesis chapter 2, God brings the animals to Adam to name. And after naming the animals, he is placed into a deep sleep and the woman is taken from his side and brought to him.

It's an unusual word that we see for deep sleep. A word only found in Genesis chapter 2 and Genesis chapter 16 within this book. This deep sleep is followed by meeting the woman.

And at the beginning of chapter 16, the woman comes on the scene. There is however a problem. Sarai, Abraham's wife is barren.

She's not having any children. And so a supposed solution is proposed that Sarai give Hagar, her Egyptian maidservant, to Abraham and that Hagar would have children for the sake of Sarai. Now there's a pattern here that we should notice.

It continues the pattern that we saw in Genesis chapter 2 and Genesis chapter 15. The woman is brought to the man and now we see a full pattern playing out. The woman brought to the man but now the woman takes, gives to the man.

The man listens to the voice of his wife which is an echo of the language of Genesis chapter 3. This is a warning sign time. We're seeing these words cropping up, these expressions recurring. It's a sign that something is very wrong.

There's nothing wrong of course with listening to your wife. But the language is charged language. It's language that reminds us of some time previously in the story where things went very badly awry.

And what happens after the man takes what is given to him by the wife and listen to her voice, eyes are opened. He goes into Hagar, she conceives and when she saw that she had conceived, received the fruit perhaps, her mistress became despised in her eyes. Her eyes are opened and she despises her mistress.

And then Sarai blames Abraham. Such a cycle of recrimination might remind us of what we see in Genesis chapter 3 as there's a blame shifting between the man and his wife and then the man blaming God as well and then his wife, the woman, blaming the serpent. If we look at the text carefully it says that Sarai gave Hagar to be his wife.

Now I'm not sure that that's what Sarai's intention was. Sarai wanted Abraham to raise children through Hagar for her. She wasn't expecting that Hagar would be an equal wife alongside her.

She wanted to be built up through Hagar. That language of being built up is significant

language. It's the language that we see for the formation of Eve in Genesis chapter 2. Eve is built out of the side of the man.

It's a building up and she wants to be built up through Hagar. And Hagar is given to her husband but then she realises this was not what she wanted. After conceiving Hagar looks at her mistress in a different way, seeing herself as an equal, a wife alongside her, not just a maidservant, a wife of Abraham with a child of her own.

And in some ways the text would seem to back her up. There's a validation of her new status. And this shift is very reminiscent of the forbidden fruit story.

She feels deceived or Sarai feels deceived. She didn't know that this was going to happen. And her eyes are opened and she feels naked.

She feels judged and she no longer has the same status as she once did. This child is now going to be raised not as hers but by this independent woman who was once her maidservant. Hagar is going to stand independently of her.

And so she blames Abraham. And this movement to a judgement scene is seen as Abraham gives Hagar over into the hands of Sarai saying you do what's pleasing in your sight. And the language of sight continues throughout this passage.

The play on the theme of sight and seeing is important. They see that the fruit is good. The eyes are open.

They see that they are naked. They're hiding from sight in Genesis chapter 3. And these sorts of themes recur in Genesis chapter 16. Sarai sees that she's not bearing children.

The handmaid is given to Abraham and she sees that she conceives. And then she looks at her mistress and despises her. And then Sarai's eyes are opened to the situation that she is despised in Hagar's eyes.

She's then handed over to Sarai to do what is pleasing in her eyes. Then Hagar flees from the sight of her mistress. The angel then finds her by a spring or literally an eye of water in the wilderness.

By the eye on the road to shore. And he asks her what's going on with her. Again there are sight themes here.

And these are things that we see within the fall. Adam and Eve hid from the presence of God and God judged them. God came and said where are you to Adam.

Adam was hiding because he was naked. Who told you that you were naked. And here we have a similar thing.

Hagar flees from the presence and sight of her mistress. And as she flees the angel of

the Lord comes and the angel of the Lord asks essentially the same question as God asked to Adam. Where are you? Why are you here? From where are you going? Why have you hidden? Why have you fled? The angel of the Lord instructs her to return to her mistress and submit herself under her hand.

A very similar thing that we see in the judgment on the woman in verse 16 of chapter 3 at the end of the story of the fall. There the woman is told that her desire will be for her husband and her husband will rule over her. It's a breaking down of the reciprocity in that relationship.

It becomes fraught. It becomes a relationship of subjugation rather than a healthy one. And here Hagar is told to return to an oppressive relationship with her mistress.

It's not what we might expect. But the theme continues. She returns to her mistress.

It's connected with the theme of the judgment upon Eve. But there is a redemptive tone. As she returns to her mistress she is told that her descendants will be multiplied exceedingly so that they cannot be counted for the multitude.

In Genesis chapter 3 Eve is told I will multiply your conceptions. And here there's something similar but not just the pain of conception but the number of children that are to be born in a way that is more emphasizing blessing rather than judgment. There are a series of statements made by the angel of the Lord here.

So the angel of the Lord said. Then the angel of the Lord said. And then the angel of the Lord said in verses 9, 10, 11.

These might be successive speeches. Each of them answered by silence on the part of Hagar until finally she speaks. Return to your mistress and submit yourself under her hands.

And then the response of silence. I will multiply your descendants exceedingly so that they shall not be counted for multitude. And then the response of silence.

And then finally behold you are with child and you shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael because the Lord has heard your affliction. Note the shift from seeing to hearing.

He shall be a wild man. His hand shall be against every man and every man's hand against him. And he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.

And at this point she responds and her response draws upon the theme of sight again. You are the God who sees. And she comments upon the fact that God has seen her.

This is the first time that we see God named by a human character or given a title. And it's significant that this is the character of Hagar, not Sarai or Abram, not some other

significant character in the narrative that we might expect to name God, someone like Noah or maybe Seth or some other character like that. It's Hagar, the Egyptian bond servant.

And so we see the playing out of a story of the fall. And Sarai and Abram are on the wrong side of this in many ways. They're playing out the pattern of Adam and Eve.

And Hagar plays out something of the pattern of Eve but in a more redemptive sense. Another thing to notice here is that Hagar is associated with Egypt. As I mentioned at the beginning, this is an important detail to notice.

There is a servant in the house of Abram and Sarai, the chosen people of God, and they're mistreating this Egyptian maid servant. She's described as being afflicted. God hears her affliction.

Her name might even suggest the stranger. God has said in the previous chapter, your descendants will be strangers in a land not their own, and they will serve them and they will afflict them 400 years. And in the very next chapter, we see an Egyptian who's afflicted as a stranger within the house of Abram himself.

And here I think we're having an anticipation of the Exodus, an Exodus twisted and perverted. The afflicting party is Sarai, the wife of Abram. It's not Pharaoh.

Rather, it's the people of God. The descendants of Abram are going to have to be servants in the house of Pharaoh. And now we see this ancestor, their great ancestor, as the one who's afflicting an Egyptian.

There will have to be a reversal of this. Israel is going to have to enter into the experience of Hagar and redeem that experience. The story is going to have to be reversed.

And Abram had an account of all of this beforehand in his vision, told that his descendants would be in the position of Hagar, that they would be servants and afflicted in a house not their own. And in his own household, we are seeing these things playing out. It's a fall pattern.

It's an Exodus pattern as God meets the person fleeing from affliction in the wilderness and shows grace to them. And so within this story, we have a preview of some of the greater themes that will be developed towards the end of the book of Genesis and then into the book of Exodus. A question to meditate upon.

The story of Genesis at this point seems to be the story of Abram and Sarai. And yet in chapter 16, the story seems to focus, place its spotlight upon not Abram and Sarai but this seemingly unimportant Egyptian maid servant. She becomes the central figure in the story.

She becomes the character who's blessed, who God appears to and shows grace to. She even gives God a title, declares God's name to be the God who sees. What can we learn about God's character that the figure of Hagar receives the sort of attention that he receives in this chapter? What does it say about God's purpose in the formation of his people? And how does the way that God tells this story help us to understand its broader purpose and destination? John chapter 7 verse 53 to chapter 8 verse 30.

They went each to his own house but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and taught them.

The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and placing her in the midst they said to him, teacher this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say? This they said to test him that they might have some charge to bring against him.

Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground and as they continued to ask him he stood up and said to them, let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her. And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it they went away one by one beginning with the older ones and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.

Jesus stood up and said to her, woman where are they? Has no one condemned you? She said no one Lord. And Jesus said, neither do I condemn you. Go and from now on sin no more.

Again Jesus spoke to them saying, I am the light of the world whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life. So the Pharisees said to him, you are bearing witness about yourself your testimony is not true. Jesus answered, even if I do bear witness about myself my testimony is true for I know where I came from and where I am going but you do not know where I come from or where I am going.

You judge according to the flesh I judge no one yet even if I do judge my judgment is true for it is not I alone who judge but I and the father who sent me. In your law it is written that the testimony of two people is true I am the one who bears witness about myself and the father who sent me bears witness about me. They said to him therefore where is your father? Jesus answered, you know neither me nor my father if you knew me you would know my father also.

These words he spoke in the treasury as he taught in the temple but no one arrested him because his hour had not yet come. So he said to them again I am going away and you will seek me and you will die in your sin where I am going you cannot come. So the Jews said, will he kill himself since he says where I am going you cannot come? He said to them you are from below I am from above you are of this world I am not of this world I

told you that you would die in your sins for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins.

So they said to him who are you? Jesus said to them just what I have been telling you from the beginning I have much more to say about you and much to judge but he who sent me is true and I declare to the world what I have heard from him. They did not understand that he had been speaking to them about the father. So Jesus said to them when you have lifted up the Son of Man then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own authority but speak just as the father taught me and he who sent me is with me he has not left me alone for I always do the things that are pleasing to him.

As he was saying these things many believed in him. John chapter 7 verses 53 to 8 verse 11 is not present in many of the earliest manuscripts and so the question arises of what we're supposed to do with this. While some might argue that there are johannine themes it might fit more neatly with the themes and style of Luke's gospel or one of the other synoptics.

Although it's not present in many of the earliest versions however this passage has been received by the church from fairly early on and it seems to be an authentic tradition. I'm inclined to treat it as a sort of orphan that's through God's providence been taken into the house of John's text. It wasn't written by John but it belongs in the scripture.

I'm not going to make any decisive theological argument on its basis though and although we can doubt the source from which it comes when we speak of it I think it's worth discussing. The scribes and the pharisees here seem to be trying to trap Jesus in his words either getting him to claim an authority that would go against the rule of the Romans or to compromise the law of Moses. The scribes are only mentioned here in the book of John and the movement between the temple and the mount of olives is only mentioned here in John so once again we're seeing elements within this account that would seem to mark it out from its surroundings.

The attempts of the scribes and the pharisees to trap Jesus in his words and Jesus' shrewd response is also similar to what we can see in the final chapters of some of the synoptics. My suspicion then is that this records an authentic tradition concerning Jesus but wasn't written by John. Jesus' point in challenging the scribes and the pharisees is not that the death penalty is wrong per se which is how many people have read this passage but that the death penalty could only be unjustly exercised under those circumstances.

Every one of the witnesses that come forward is somehow compromised whether if we see some sort of conspiracy of entrapment could ask where is the man if she's been caught red-handed or through their own guilt of the same sin. Within the Old Testament the person who cast a stone was casting making a self-maladictory oath that if they were guilty in some sense the same judgment would come back upon them. Within Luke



chapter 16 verses 14 to 18 Jesus challenges the scribes and the pharisees for their sexual license and maybe that is part of the background here.

Jesus focuses attention upon the first stone. Now why the first stone? As Rene Girard has observed it's the first stone that sets the pattern for all of the others. Each successive stone is easier to throw.

The other thing is that the first stone was to be cast by witnesses. In Deuteronomy chapter 17 verse 7 we see this. The witnesses were subject to the same penalty themselves if they sinned in the act of judgment.

No one could cast the first stone without taking that responsibility upon themselves and if no one could cast the first stone then no execution could occur. And where there were no witnesses in a case of adultery a different judgment applied which is the test of jealousy that we see in Numbers chapter 5. What Jesus seems to be doing here is showing that all of the supposed witnesses are disqualified. They're not in a position to judge and so gradually they remove themselves from the scene and the remaining form of judgment is the test of jealousy.

Now this might explain why Jesus is writing on the ground. When the scribes and the pharisees bring forward the woman Jesus pretends not to hear them and he stoops down and he writes on the ground and he's already putting the appropriate law for the woman's case into effect. When the scribes and the pharisees are insistent he shows them that they are disqualified as witnesses according to the adultery law but his legal response his own response is ongoing so he's spending a considerable amount of time writing.

Enough time for the scribes and the pharisees to ask him to respond several times to his question and enough for all the accusers gradually to leave one by one and even seemingly for some time after they've all departed. And I don't think that this writing is incidental to the narrative but it's important for what's taking place. The significance of the writing becomes clearer in the context of the numbers five ritual of jealousy.

It's the only rite of its kind to involve lengthy writing as part of its process. So the events take place in the temple just as the ritual of jealousy took place in the tabernacle before the presence of God. The ritual of jealousy involved dust from the ground of the tabernacle floor a process of writing and holy water and the effect was to reveal secret sin through the deliverance of divine judgment typically involving some curse or condemnation coming upon the guilty party.

And in the story of the woman caught in adultery we see these elements. Jesus performs the writing ritual with his finger on the dust of the ground of the temple and we're playing out this pattern. The judgment is taking place and the woman's about to be tested.

The test of jealousy essentially involves God judging in cases where there are no fit human witnesses. No human witness in a position to understand what has gone on. Jesus enacts the ritual of jealousy and at the climax of the ritual of jealousy God judges in the case of the woman who's accused of adultery.

But here it's Jesus who judges. He claims the prerogative of God in judgment in which all human judgment is put to one side and God alone declares and enacts the sentence. This I believe is an important witness to Christ's identity.

Jesus brings hidden sins to light and he brings judgment upon the situation. He's not merely playing the role of the priest in this ritual then but the role of God himself and his judgment concerning the woman is a judgment characterized by grace. A judgment that calls her not to sin anymore but lets her go free.

The conversation that follows returns to many of the themes that we've seen in the chapter that proceeds. The themes of origins, of witness, of bearing true or false witness and here Jesus is raising tensions with the Jews as he responds to their questions and challenges them and shows that they are speaking falsehood. His origins are from above, theirs are from below.

Where he is going they cannot come and that statement is taken by them to refer to a possible attempt at suicide and there is an irony there because it will be precisely through Jesus' death and his willing going to the cross that he will forge this way that they cannot come on. Jesus' identity continues to be cryptic at this point and yet he makes this statement that is a startling one. When you have lifted up the son of man then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own authority but speak just as the father taught me.

The statement I am he is one that might be suggesting a claim at divinity, something that we see later on in this chapter seemingly confirming that this is in view at this point. God's name is I am and Jesus presents himself as the I am who has come to visit his people. The closeness of the relationship between Jesus and the father is emphasised throughout this passage.

If you knew me you would know my father also and then later on that he speaks just as the father taught him. As a final question to reflect upon think about the ways in which Christ identifies himself with and connects himself with the father within this and other chapters within the Gospel of John. How are we seeing an early Trinitarian theology starting to take shape at this point?