

The Hagar-Sarah Conflict

“Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator.”

—Galatians 3:19

IN CONSIDERING HAGAR,

it is virtually impossible not to think also about Sarah, due to the complex relationship they had with each other as is recorded in the Genesis narrative. The ongoing Mideast conflict also draws our attention to these two women because their respective sons, Ishmael and Isaac, were both

fathered by Abraham, who is revered by both Arabs and Jews to this day. The following New Testament passage indicates that these two mothers were allegorical of two covenants.

“It is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar. For this Agar is mount Sinai in

Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. For it is written, Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband. Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now. Nevertheless, what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman. So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free.”—Gal. 4:22-31

TYPICAL ILLUSTRATIONS

In the foregoing account, Abraham was an illustration of God. Sarah was a type of the Abrahamic Covenant, and Isaac was a type of the Christ, Head and Body. The bondwoman, Hagar, represented the Law Covenant, and her son, Ishmael, represented the Jewish nation that was under the Law Covenant. Abraham was promised a seed, but his wife Sarah was barren and past childbearing age, so she gave Hagar, her young handmaid, to him. Hagar became the mother of Ishmael “after the flesh,” that is to say, in the usual manner in which children are conceived. Many years later, however, Isaac was born to Sarah, the freewoman, who brought him forth in fulfillment of the divine promise as a result of special providences employed by God to facilitate her having a child so late in her life.—Gen. 18:11-14; 21:1,2

Just as Sarah was barren for a period of time, the Abrahamic promise to have a seed to bless all the families of the earth lay dormant. In the meantime, Hagar, representing the Law Covenant, brought forth Ishmael who pictured natural Israel. Although the natural seed came first, ultimately the Sarah Covenant will bring forth many more children than the Law Covenant. The antitypical Isaac class, Christ and his Bride, will be the mother and father of the entire race of mankind. The context of Paul's earlier reference from Galatians chapter four suggests that the one who "hath an husband" was Hagar. This is because she brought forth Ishmael according to the natural husband and wife arrangement, and this occurred before Isaac was born to Sarah. In reality, however, Hagar was a bondwoman, or servant, as opposed to Sarah, who was the true wife of Abraham. Finally, the casting out of the bondwoman and her son showed that after Israel's house was left desolate and the period of exclusive Jewish favor had ended, the promises associated with blessing all the families of the earth were given to the son of the free woman, the Christ, Head and Body.—Matt. 23:37-39; Gal. 3:16,28,29

TESTS OF FAITH AND OBEDIENCE

From the Old Testament narrative, Abram, as he then was known, was informed that if he would leave his native land and go to settle in a land which he would be shown, God would make a covenant with him. Through this covenant promise Abram would become great, and through his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed. (Gen. 12:1-3) Abram then departed from his home. "By faith Abraham, when

he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.” (Heb. 11:8) We are told that Abram was 75 years old when he departed from Haran. The Scriptures also inform us that Sarai, prior to being called Sarah, was ten years younger than her husband, meaning that she was 65 years old when she left Haran with Abram.—Gen. 12:4;17:17

Most assuredly, we believe, Abraham and Sarah, despite their advancing ages, received the ultimate testimony that they pleased God based on their faith, regardless of matters surrounding their fleshly circumstances. Speaking of these Old Testament faith heroes, Paul says, “Of whom the world was not worthy: they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.”—Heb. 11:38-40

When there appeared to be a delay in the fulfillment of God’s promise regarding a seed, Abram suggested that perhaps his servant Eliezer could become his heir, but God gave him assurances that he would father a son. Later, we are introduced to Hagar, the Egyptian slave girl, an unmarried and childless woman. (Gen. 15:2-4; 16:1) Sarai apparently viewed this as the solution to her problem of being barren. She gave Hagar to her husband so that he could bring forth a seed. At this point God had not revealed to Abram that his heir would be born through Sarai. Thus, when the proposition was made to take Hagar, Abram must have assumed it was what the Lord would have him do to fulfill the promise of having a seed.

Sarai also saw no problem with this arrangement. Her words in Genesis 16:2, “It may be that I may obtain children” by Hagar, seem to imply that her maidservant would simply do her bidding and act as a surrogate mother. We see nothing in the account to imply that either Sarai or Abram thought anything could go wrong with such a plan. Of course, God permitted this to occur and used it as part of the allegory previously referred to in Galatians chapter 4. A very basic lesson for the Lord’s people today is to commit all things to God in prayer rather than to take matters into our own hands. (Prov. 3:5,6) Our Heavenly Father can overrule so that unwise courses of action on our part provide valuable lessons. How much better it is, though, to seek his will first, before acting on our own initiative, which sometimes reaps bitter fruitage. Returning to the account, Hagar conceives a child, despises her mistress and Sarai complains to Abram, who tells her that she is free to do with Hagar as she pleases. We are then told that Sarai dealt harshly with Hagar.—Gen. 16:3-6

CONSEQUENCES OF BARRENNESS

Concerning Hagar despising her mistress, it would appear that she may have been flaunting her pregnancy by looking down upon Sarai and her inability to conceive. Going back to the Genesis account where it is recorded that the seed of the woman would bruise the serpent’s head, we believe God-fearing women had the hope that this promise would be fulfilled in themselves. We additionally recall two other examples of the agony experienced when women could not bear children. “When Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob,

Give me children, or else I die.” (Gen. 30:1) “Unto Hannah he [her husband Elkanah] gave a worthy portion; for he loved Hannah: but the LORD had shut up her womb. And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the LORD, and wept sore.”—I Sam. 1:5,10

What prompted Hagar’s indiscretion in displaying haughtiness towards her mistress? Did she think, perhaps, that she would replace Sarai as wealthy Abram’s favored wife? Did Sarai feel threatened that this could happen? “Under three things the earth is disquieted, and under four it cannot bear up. Under a servant when he reigns, a fool when he is filled with food, an unloved and repugnant woman when she is married, and a maidservant when she supplants her mistress.” (Prov. 30:21-23, *The Amplified Bible*) Whatever these two women thought, after Hagar conceived, things in their relationship were never going to be the same as they had been previously.

Evidently, once Hagar was with child, her status must have risen. This is first shown by the fact that Sarai was solicitous of her needs, probably insuring the most favorable conditions for this mother to be who was carrying what Sarai considered to be her own child. Secondly, Sarai had to receive Abram’s approval for meting out punishment towards Hagar for her actions. When we read that Sarai dealt with her harshly, it may not refer to any physical action, but probably a removal of whatever special privileges she may have enjoyed since her pregnancy commenced.

HAGAR’S FLIGHT AND RETURN

After being humiliated by Sarai, Hagar ran away, determined to face her situation alone. She then encountered an angel of the Lord in the wilderness

on the road to Shur. Apparently, Hagar had decided to return to Egypt to fulfill her destiny, but after her meeting with the heavenly visitor her attitude changed. The angel said to Hagar, “Whence camest thou? and whither wilt thou go? And she said, I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai. And the angel of the LORD said unto her, Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands.”—Gen. 16:6-9

The angel then gave Hagar this further message from the Lord: “I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude. And the angel of the LORD said unto her, Behold, thou art with child, and shalt bear a son, and shalt call his name Ishmael; because the LORD hath heard thy affliction. And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man’s hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren. And she called the name of the LORD that spake unto her, Thou God seest me: for she said, Have I also here looked after him that seeth me?”—vss. 10-13

Several matters worthy of mention are shown in this episode. In verse 13 it is apparent that Hagar understood she had been speaking to an angelic being and as such she manifested a reverential spirit in acknowledging that fact. When questioned as to what she was doing in the desert, she gave a truthful answer that she was fleeing from her mistress. Hagar’s obedience in returning and submitting to Sarai demonstrated that she had reconsidered her previous arrogance. Her responsiveness to these divine instructions coincides with a New Testament admonition for the church as it may relate to secular service and employment. “Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh,

with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men: Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord.”—Eph. 6:5-8

The angel’s assurance that Hagar’s seed would be multiplied exceedingly was another factor in making her acquiesce in returning to Sarai. That promise, of course, took some time to be fulfilled, but it suggests a lesson in patience for us to internalize as the footstep followers of Christ. “Wait on the LORD: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the LORD.”—Ps. 27:14

DOUBTING WHAT SEEMED UNLIKELY

In contrasting Hagar’s seeming faith when approached by the angel of the Lord, we might look briefly at initial reactions by Abram and Sarai under similar circumstances, recalling again that they had the testimony of being pleasing to God. Sometime after Ishmael was born to Hagar, we read the following account. “God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her. Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear? And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee!”—Gen.17:15-18

It seems apparent that Abraham never revealed to Sarah God's promise that she would have a child, thus suggesting some doubt in Abraham's mind that this truly would occur. Support for this assertion is supplied when Sarah overhears heavenly visitors telling Abraham that she would have a son. Here was her reaction: "Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?" We then recall how the angel inquired whether anything was too hard for the Lord to do, upon which Sarah denied laughing. (Gen. 18:10-15) Surely her initial reaction was one of unbelief, and as suggested previously, Abraham did not have the confidence to share this news earlier after first hearing it.

CONSEQUENCES OF MOCKING

After the birth of Isaac, conditions were very different, and Sarah experienced the joy of motherhood. On the occasion of a great feast to celebrate her son Isaac's weaning, the record states that Ishmael mocked Isaac. Whatever the nature of that mocking was, it set off a red flag to Sarah, and her reaction was swift. "Wherefore she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac. And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son."—Gen. 21:8-11

There is no question that Abraham loved Ishmael deeply and was very pained by Sarah's request. God spoke to Abraham, however, assuring him of his providences on Ishmael's behalf. Abraham sent Hagar away with some bread and water for herself and her son, but without any escort into the wilderness of Beersheba. On the surface that seems like a

meager provision for Hagar and Ishmael whom he loved. We do not know the details, but one suggestion given referring to this matter is that Abraham had shepherds and other workers scattered in various nearby locations at strategic points, and that it was his intention that Hagar and Ishmael resettle in one of these areas. If that were so, Hagar apparently lost her way and wandered off course into the desert. Having run out of water, she feared that her young child would die, until by divine providence they came upon a well of water by which Ishmael was revived. The record states that God's care over Ishmael continued, "And he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer. And he dwelt in the wilderness of Paran: and his mother took him a wife out of the land of Egypt."—vss. 12-21

RIGHTS OF THE FIRSTBORN

There are numerous details concerning the Law Covenant and the Sarah feature of the Abrahamic Covenant considered in the allegory of Galatians chapter 4. Much of the world's attention is focused today on the ongoing Middle East conflict between the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael. Interestingly enough, at the time of Abraham's death apparently relations between Isaac and Ishmael were probably good, and they had amiable contact with each other at the time of their father's burial. "His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, which is before Mamre."—Gen. 25:8,9

The following passage of Scripture has been used sometimes in an attempt to justify Arab claims

that they have a right to Israel's land. "If a man have two wives, one beloved, and another hated, and they have born him children, both the beloved and the hated; and if the firstborn son be hers that was hated: Then it shall be, when he maketh his sons to inherit that which he hath, that he may not make the son of the beloved firstborn before the son of the hated, which is indeed the firstborn: But he shall acknowledge the son of the hated for the firstborn, by giving him a double portion of all that he hath: for he is the beginning of his strength; the right of the firstborn is his."—Deut. 21:15-17

The foregoing verses provide a general rule with regard to the standing of the firstborn even during the days of the patriarchs such as Abraham. God, however, retains the right to make exceptions as he deems fit. He did so in the case of Isaac and Ishmael, since they were divinely appointed pictures of the Gospel church and Israel. We thus see that the natural seed of Abraham, typified by Ishmael, was developed first. Then the spiritual seed, through whom all the families of the earth are to be blessed, pictured by Isaac, will come and "out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem."—Gen.12:3; Acts 3:25; Isa. 2:3

REACTING TO THE MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT

In considering present day circumstances in Israel, there is a division among the people there as to what should be done to relieve their situation. There are those who say that Israel should negotiate for secure borders which, it is hoped, would result in peaceful co-existence with their enemies. Others believe Israel must never accept such a compromise

because God gave them the land and it is theirs to protect and defend. Many Jews recall how they have been mistreated and almost eradicated as a people by the holocaust and declare, “never again.” Finally, there are some who are waiting for the Messiah to resolve all these concerns.

What should be the spiritual Israelites’ response to these issues? One of the best things to do is to point to the scriptural promises that demonstrate future conditions of peace and righteousness in the world which will come to Jews, Arabs and all peoples of the earth. The Bible clearly indicates there will be a restoration which will provide everlasting blessings for mankind and that speak of favorable conditions under the New Covenant. (Isa. 35:5-10; Jer. 31:31-34; Acts 15:16,17) We are to remember that the evil we presently see in the world is traceable to sin and that with Satan bound, the nations will learn righteousness. Above all, we should not find ourselves out of control because we see atrocities in one place or another, though it pains us to see evil wherever it is found.

Let our attitudes reflect the spirit of this sage counsel. “Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.” (Rom. 12:19) Let us order our steps in such a way that we will be a part of the antitypical Isaac who, with our beloved Head, Christ Jesus, will straighten out all of earth’s affairs and right all the wrongs that have existed in the world since man’s fall in Eden. It will be then that the prophet’s words will reach their fulfilment. “When thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness.”—Isa. 26:9 ■