

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Eighth Week -- Monday

HAGAR

"Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, 'See now, Yahweh has restrained me from bearing children. Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her.' And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai. Then Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan. So he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress became despised in her eyes" (Genesis 16:1-4).

It is worthy of note that Abram's wife had female slaves of her own, or at least one such, over whom the master had little if any power. This is still the case in the East with respect to all such slaves obtained by gift, purchase, or dower; they are the actual property of the mistress. Where, indeed, there is none but domestic female slavery, the mistress assumes the entire control of even the female slaves bought by the master for the service of his house; but where such slaves are employed in outdoor service, such as the tending of cattle, the power of the mistress is limited to those engaged in domestic service while the others are under the more direct control of the master. This statement may serve to illustrate the relative conditions of the doubtless numerous female slaves in the camp of Abram.

One of these women, named Hagar, was Sarai's own slave, apparently in the highest sense as having been presented to her or bought by her. As this woman was an Egyptian and was the personal attendant of Sarai, there may be reason to suppose that she had been given to Sarai as an attendant by the king of Egypt while she was detained in his house. When the monarch gave her "brother" men servants and maid servants for her sake, he was not likely to leave Sarai without some such tokens of his consideration.

Abram had no doubt acquainted Sarai with the various promises from the Lord which had been made to him. But she was less disposed than he to await God's own time and mode of accomplishing the purpose he had declared. A most notable device entered her mind, which seems strange to us but which was probably in conformity with existing customs. She proposed that Abram should take her maid as a kind of secondary wife, so that if any children came from this union they might, as the children of her handmaid, be accounted hers. There

was nothing in this that could have appeared wrong to Abram, though to us it wears an unpleasant aspect. But in any case, he ought to have waited in faith for the fulfillment of the high promise he had received.

However, it should be noticed that although Abram had received the assurance of a son, he had not yet been told that Sarai was to be the mother, and he may have supposed that the course which was taken was in full accordance with the Divine intention. It is clear that Sarai herself had altogether abandoned the hope of giving birth to a child and that it was at her urgency that Abram consented, probably against his better judgment. It is indeed remarkable that of the three patriarchs, the two who gave their sanction to the practice of polygamy did so not of their own free will but were driven into it by the contrivance of others.

The evil of this measure soon appeared in its effects. It became evident before long that Hagar would become the mother of a child, and the prospects which this condition opened to her exalted her in her own sight. As a result, Sarai no longer received from Hagar the respect to which she had been accustomed. Disrespect of this sort would appear in the darkest colors to the naturally jealous mind of Sarai, and she soon regarded with dislike the woman who had been made the instrument of her own designs, and who, in only a short time, would receive the blessing that had so long been denied her. Hagar would become the happy mother of a child.

It is far from improbable that the whole transaction became hateful in Sarai's eyes when the time of childbirth came near. That all the blame is not on Sarai's side appears more than probable from the way in which she assails her husband on the subject and lays at his door all the blame of a transaction which was entirely of her own devising. To pacify her, Abram, who manifestly hated domestic strife and generally avoided it by letting Sarai have her own way, told her, "Behold the maid is in your hand, do to her as it pleases you." However, this she could do without his permission while Hagar was simply her own slave. But now that the woman had acquired a new place as a secondary wife, it precluded Sarai from disposing of her without Abram's consent. Nevertheless, Abram's words restored to Sarai all her original power over her handmaid and divested him of all right of interfering even should her conduct toward Hagar be utterly averse to his own inclinations and wishes.

So Sarai now uses her power so unsparingly that Hagar abandons all her high prospects and aspirations and determines to seek relief in flight. She withdrew into the southern wilderness, probably intending to find her way to Egypt. But one day, as she rested by a well of water, the angel of God found her and conveyed the comforting assurance that she was not forsaken. He told her to return to her mistress and behave with submission to her. And to encourage her obedience, he proceeded to disclose the destinies of her unborn child: "You shall bear a son, and shall call his name Ishmael, because Yahweh has heard your affliction. 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" (vv. 11,12).

Hagar no doubt understood that this characteristic was designed to describe not merely the

individual, that is, Ishmael, but the race to spring from him. Taken as such, it is a most extraordinary prediction. The character which it describes was too common in an unsettled age to excite special attention. What is remarkable in the prediction is that it was to remain the character of a race, as it ever has done in his Arabian descendants. Other nations have changed their habits of life and not one retains its original character. The sole exception is in the descendants of Ishmael, in accordance with a prediction published at a time when no human knowledge could foresee, nor any human power ensure, the certainty of its fulfillment. The wilderness has become permanent with them; and although they have been compacted and embodied as a nation for more than three thousand years, they have resisted those changes of habits which a long continued civil union induces.

In addition, Ishmael's race was to remain in the possession of the land originally acquired; for this is how the expression, that he "should dwell in the presence of all his brethren," is usually interpreted. While other nations and tribes have again and again changed their habitations or have become subject to strangers in their own lands, the Arabians have occupied one and the same country. "They have roved like the moving sands of their deserts; but their race has been rooted while the individual wandered. That race has neither been dissipated by conquest, nor lost by migration, nor confounded with the blood of other countries. They have continued to dwell in the presence of their brethren, a distinct nation, wearing upon the whole the same features and aspects which prophecy first impressed upon them" (Davison, *Discourses on Prophecy*, p. 493).