

- Abraham's doubts

1. Confusion

- Sarai's childlessness made her feel a failure

- Sarai suggested following a pagan custom

- No sense of confidence

- Abram did not seek God's counsel

- Abraham 'turned to the flesh'

- Hagar thought too highly of herself

2. Running ahead of God brings trouble

- Sarai's resentment and blame of Abram

For a long time Sarai had been unable to have a child, and so now Abram overwhelmed by doubts and perplexities, is doubting whether the promised 'seed' will ever be born through Sarai. Everyone in Genesis 16 acts badly. Only God stands out well.

1. Consider first, **the confusion of the three characters in the story** ^{☞1}.

Sarai was feeling a failure. She had never been able to bear a child ^{☞1}, and in most cultures a childless woman experiences a lot of suffering. Everything God had promised had been for Abram. Abram even spoke of adopting a servant as his son and heir ^{☞2}. He seemed to have given up hope for Sarai. And God seemed to be against her. 'Yahweh has prevented me from bearing children' ^{☞3}.

Shame, guilt, a poor self-image, lack of confidence – they all tend to produce confusion and blunders. Sarah had an Egyptian servant-girl, Hagar, who had been with her since the trip to Egypt ^{☞1}. Abram had been told that 'the seed' was to come from his own body ^{☞2}. In those days, it was possible for a man with a childless wife to make use of a slave-girl in order to produce a child. In such a situation the childless wife took the child as her own and the true mother had no rights in the matter. So Sarai suggests that the pagan custom be followed and that Abram should get a child through Hagar.

She was acting without sense, without foresight, without guidance, without assurance. She could only say 'it may be' ^{☞1}.

Abram made mistakes as well. He 'listened to the voice of Sarai' ^{☞1}. Previously he had got his guidance from God; now he was getting his guidance from his wife. Adam had done the same ^{☞2}. A wife's counsel can be useful ^{☞3} but it is not to be followed without thought.

Rather than persist in faith, Abram was turning to 'the flesh' (as Paul put it in Galatians 4:23). Rather than exercise patience he was acting prematurely. It seemed that God was not going to do anything special to produce the seed and Abram felt that he had to do something himself.

Hagar had been a slave-girl for many years. To sleep with Abram meant that she was being taken as a subordinate wife ^{☞1}. For a slave-girl it was a kind of 'promotion'! Abram takes Hagar in the way that Sarai had suggested ^{☞2}. She becomes pregnant. But then she starts acting with scorn towards Sarai. Apparently she thinks that she has now replaced Sarai as the one through whom Abram's expectations will be fulfilled.

2. **Running ahead of God brings trouble for everyone involved.** It all leads to bitterness. Sarai resents the way that she is being treated.

It leads to Sarai's blaming someone else. She blames Abram – although it was her idea in the first place! Abram is no doubt eagerly awaiting the birth of his son (but what if it had been a daughter?) and thinks that the son to be born of Hagar is the promised seed. It is not himself, Sarai and her future son Isaac that he has on his mind, but himself, Hagar and Ishmael! It is inevitable that, if he thinks Ishmael is the promised seed, he must be thinking of Hagar as the honoured mother of the chosen line. The idea that the child will belong to Sarai ^{☞1} is not totally realistic. Sarai has been displaced. Sarai is furiously resentful, and is ready to call God's judgement down upon her husband.

^{☞1} 16:1-4

^{☞1} 16:1
^{☞2} 15:2
^{☞3} 16:2

^{☞1} 12:10-20
^{☞2} 15:4

^{☞1} 16:2

^{☞1} 16:2
^{☞2} Genesis 3:6
^{☞3} see Judges 13:23

^{☞1} 16:3

^{☞2} 16:4

^{☞1} 16:2
^{☞2} 16:5

'May Yahweh judge between you and me' ^{¶2}.

• Abraham's irresponsibility

It leads to further irresponsibility on the part of Abram. 'Do to her what you like' ^{¶1} (16:6), he says. Yet this leads to suffering for Hagar. He refuses to be involved in the matter at all – but this is irresponsibility.

• Sarai's cruelty

It leads to cruelty by Sarai and suffering for Hagar. Sarai treats Hagar harshly and Hagar runs away heading for Egypt ^{¶1}.

3. Where sin abounds grace abounds all the more

3. **Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more.** God shows mercy when everyone else is showing their foolishness.

• God sought Hagar and spoke to her

It was mercy when God sought Hagar ^{¶1}. The 'angel of Yahweh' is God Himself, appearing in visible form. 'No one has seen God at any time' ^{¶2}, but there was something visible representing God.

• God's merciful direction

It was mercy when God spoke to her ^{¶1}. The 'angel of Yahweh' speaks so kindly that Hagar is led to trust him with her story. She makes no attempt to disguise who she is and what has happened to her.

• God's merciful promise

It was mercy when God told her what to do ^{¶1}. Hagar is told that she should return and submit to Sarai no matter what Sarai might do.

It was mercy when God gave her promises concerning her child ^{¶1}. She had expected that her son, the seed of Abraham, would become a great nation and that her descendants would be as many as the sand on the seashore. However her son is not actually the one God had in mind. The true 'seed of Abram' will be Sarai's son. Yet the promise to Hagar is close to what she had hoped would come to her as Abram's wife. It echoes the promises of a numerous seed that God had given to Abram. She will have a son ^{¶2}. He will be a highly individualistic person living where he likes and doing what he likes, and so clashing with everyone ^{¶3}.

• New appreciation – God's mercy

It was mercy when Hagar came into a new appreciation of God. Just as Abram had come to appreciate God as 'El Elyon' ^{¶1}, so now Hagar comes to appreciate God as 'El Roi' ('God of Seeing') because, as she said, 'Truly here in this place I have seen him who looks after me' ^{¶2}. The precise place came to be known as Beer-Lahai-Roi ^{¶3}. She had a son who was called Ishmael ^{¶4}. He was born eleven years after Abraham had arrived in Canaan ^{¶5}.

• God's kindness and abundant grace

In the midst of jealousy, cruelty, irresponsibility, impatience, and abundant sinfulness, God's grace stepped into the life of the most despised slave girl, and showed her His kindness. From that point on she would never forget what had happened to her. She now knew God as the one who had been caring for her all along. Sin was multiplying but grace was multiplying all the more.

¶1 16:6b

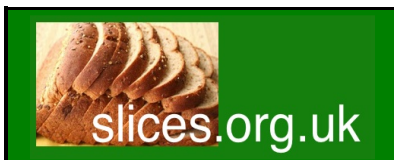
¶1 16:7
¶2 John 1:18

¶1 16:8

¶1 16:9

¶1 16:10-12
¶2 16:11
¶3 16:12

¶1 14:22
¶2 16:13
¶3 16:14
¶4 16:15
¶5 16:15-16



Dr Michael Eaton is highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. He lives in Kenya where he is one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship. His *Preaching Through The Bible* (PTTB) books are highly popular worldwide. Michael Eaton puts the theological and practical meaning of the Bible in a clear and down-to-earth way so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.



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