

God has made some significant promises to Abram over the last few chapters of the book of Genesis. For instance, God declared that Abram would become the progenitor of a great nation in [Genesis 12:1-2](#). Genesis chapter fifteen then recounts God's promise to give Abram a son to serve as his rightful heir ([Genesis 15:1-4](#)).

As we enter Genesis chapter sixteen, approximately ten years have elapsed since the events of the previous chapter. Abram is now about 86 years old as he continues to await God's fulfillment of those promises.

Like many God-honoring people who wait for the fulfillment of God's promises, Abram will soon face a choice: *"Should I continue to wait and do nothing, or should I take action? Is it better to proceed and do something that seems right or should I keep waiting?"*

Let's see what Abram decides to do...

"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, the LORD 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" (Genesis 16:1-2).

So it appears that Sarai, Abram's wife, had grown weary of waiting for God to fulfill His pledge to bless Abram with a biological heir. However, she also devised a potential solution to deal with that issue: *"Since the Lord has given me no children... you may sleep with my servant girl, and her children shall be mine" (TLB).*

This resolution may sound difficult to believe in a 21st century context until we consider the cultural backdrop of Sarai and Abram's era. You see, the inability to bear children was viewed as a social disgrace during that time. It was a great shame for a woman to be childless in that culture and a husband could actually divorce his wife if their relationship did not produce any children.

So Sarai's proposition called upon Hagar to fulfill the role of a "surrogate mother." According to the custom of that era, a child born to Hagar under that arrangement received formal recognition as Sarai's offspring. That would enable Sarai to raise a child of her own and avoid the social disgrace that accompanied childlessness.

Now, before we continue, this passage makes reference to something that bears investigation. You see, Genesis 16:2 tells us that Hagar was an Egyptian. So how did Sarai end up with an Egyptian maid? To answer that question, let's consider the events that occurred earlier in [Genesis chapter twelve](#).

It was during that time that Abram and Sarai traveled to Egypt in response to a severe famine. It was during that trip that Abram asked Sarai to pose as his sister instead of his wife to protect himself from any potential threats upon his life.

Unfortunately, Sarai was taken off to join Pharaoh's harem, just as Abram feared. However, that portion of Scripture also details God's response...

"...the Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai. So Pharaoh summoned Abram. 'What have you done to me?' he said. 'Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!'

Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had" Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had" (Genesis 12:17-20 NIV).

So Abram departed from the land with all his belongings. However, it appears that someone else joined Abram's entourage as well- an Egyptian maid named Hagar.

It is at this juncture that the details of our narrative begin to assume greater importance. Remember that God had earlier spoken to Abram to inform him that, ***"...a son who comes from your own body will be your heir"*** (***Genesis 15:4 NET***). So God clearly intended to fulfill His promise to Abram by giving him a biological son.

But even though Abram's son would share his genetics, the child's mother was never identified. This meant that if Abram fathered a son with Hagar, it would technically qualify as a fulfillment of God's promise, at least as far as Abram and Sarai were concerned.

However, there were several problems with this arrangement. You see, there is no indication that Sarai ever sought God's direction regarding this plan. In fact, it doesn't seem as if Sarai gave any real consideration to God's perspective at all.

It seems that Sarai's sole objective revolved around her desire to employ Hagar as a surrogate mother. In other words, Sarai saw an opportunity to get something she wanted and engineered a way to achieve it without guidance or direction from her Creator.

While Sarai's approach may have been culturally appropriate, that in itself did not serve to validate her decision. Such decisions are usually a bad idea, and poor decisions often lead to painful consequences. And sure enough, it didn't take long for trouble to appear...

"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 16:3-4***).

So Hagar assumed a contemptuous attitude toward Sarai once her pregnancy began. Hagar was no longer just another employee- now she was a rival who possessed something that Sarai wanted, but didn't have. That eventually led to a confrontation...

"Then Sarai said to Abram, 'You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me'" (***Genesis 16:5 NIV***).

Now Abram was stuck in the middle of this rivalry. Another translation of this passage tells us...

"...Sarai complained to Abram, 'I'm being treated unfairly! And it's your fault! I know that I gave my slave to you, but now that she's pregnant, she's being disrespectful to me. May the LORD decide who is right- you or me'" (***Genesis 16:5 GW***).

So, even though Abram agreed to Sarai's request, Sarai blamed him for her servant's new attitude of disrespect. Of course, Abram might have avoided this situation if he had sought God's counsel before he agreed to wed Hagar and father a child with her. This real-life melodrama illustrates what can happen when we choose to follow the advice of others without respect for the counsel of God. If things go wrong as a result, we may end up taking the blame for someone's bad idea.

So Sarai took it upon herself to engineer a compromise solution, seemingly without help, direction, or input from God. Abram then became entangled in this family rivalry because he acted on someone's request with no apparent effort to seek God's direction in the matter. Those decisions provided an opportunity for Hagar to express her inner contempt for Sarai.

Instead of solving her problem, Sarai's solution actually made things worse. While it is often difficult to be patient and wait for God to fulfill His promises, the alternative is to follow Sarai's example and try to "make things happen" on our own. But as we'll see, that decision often serves to complicate matters further...

"So Abram said to Sarai, 'Indeed your maid is in your hand; do to her as you please.' And when Sarai dealt harshly with her, she fled from her presence" (Genesis 16:6).

So Abram responded to Sarai's complaint by essentially saying, "Do whatever you want with her." Sarai then proceeded to abuse Hagar so badly that Hagar finally decided that she had no other option but to flee from her now-former home. But God had other plans in mind.

"Now the Angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. And He said, 'Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from, and where are you going?' She said, 'I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai'" (Genesis 16:7-8).

The relationship between Sarai and Hagar had deteriorated to such a degree that running away seemed like the only viable solution for Hagar. So Hagar left Sarai and Abram behind and started into the wilderness on the way to a new life. While Hagar probably had several roads to choose from, a bit of detective work on verse seven will shed light on her probable destination.

For instance, verse seven plots Hagar's general position and identifies it as "...***the spring on the way to Shur***" (GW). This provides us with some information about the direction of Hagar's travel and offers a hint regarding her journey.

If we plot Hagar's starting point and compare it to her location in Genesis 16:7, we find that her route charted a course in the general direction of Egypt. ⁽¹⁾ Since Hagar was an Egyptian, this means that she probably intended to return to her ancestral homeland.

Shur was about 50 miles (80 km) away from where Hagar began her journey. Depending on the exact location of that spring, it might take three days for Hagar to travel that distance on foot. So after a few days of hot, dusty travel, Hagar "...***stopped to rest at a spring in the desert on the road to Shur. While she was there, the angel of the LORD came to her***" (Genesis 16:7 CEV).

This is our initial introduction to someone who is simply identified as "***the angel of the LORD.***" This person will go on to appear several times in the Old Testament Scriptures. Some believe that "***the angel of the Lord***" (as opposed to "***an angel of the Lord***") refers to a "Christophany" or an Old Testament appearance of Christ prior to His human birth.

So the angel of the LORD approached Hagar with a modest question: "***Where did you come from and where are you going?***" To Hagar's credit, she responded truthfully: "***I am running away from Sarai, my master's wife***" (Genesis 16:8 BBE). But Hagar was about to find that God had other travel arrangements for her.

(1) See also [1 Samuel 27:8](#) which mentions Shur and says that it was located "...***toward the land of Egypt***" (NLT).

"The Angel of the Lord said to her, 'Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand'" (Genesis 16:9).

Hagar's example reminds us that God doesn't always permit us to run from difficult situations. Sometimes God asks His people to stay within a difficult environment as He executes His plan for their lives.

For Hagar, this meant returning to Sarai with an attitude of submission. But the angel of the LORD also had something else to say as well...

“Then the Angel of the Lord said to her, 'I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude.' And the Angel of the Lord said to her: 'Behold, you are with child, And you shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, Because the Lord 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'” (Genesis 16:10-12).

Hagar's son, Ishmael, would eventually fulfill God's promise and become the progenitor of the Arabic peoples we know today. ⁽¹⁾ This means Abram served as the forerunner of two great people groups. One is the Arabic peoples who are descended from Abram through Ishmael (whose birth is recorded near the end of this chapter). The Jewish people are also descended from Abram through his son Isaac (whom we'll meet later in Genesis chapter twenty-one).

Ishmael's name means, “God hears.” That name served to remind Hagar that Abram's God was the one true God, the God who appeared to her and spoke with her. But Hagar also received a cautionary message regarding her unborn son as well: ***“This son of yours will be a wild man, as untamed as a wild donkey! He will raise his fist against everyone, and everyone will be against him. Yes, he will live in open hostility against all his relatives” (Genesis 16:12 NLT).***

So the Angel of the LORD predicted that Ishmael would go on to become a tough, independent person. He would be the type of man who was unafraid to engage in conflict with others, even with those within his own family.

In a way, these predictions foreshadow the interaction between the Jewish and non-Jewish residents of the Middle East today. These two great people groups are descendants of the same father (Abram) but live in conflict with one another.

(1) Morris, H. M. (1976). *The Genesis Record: A Scientific and Devotional Commentary on the Book of Beginnings*. [pg. 331]

“She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: 'You are the God who sees me,' for she said, 'I have now seen the One who sees me.' That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered” (Genesis 16:13-14).

In the days of the Old Testament, it was not unusual to name a person or a place after a significant event. We saw an earlier example of this practice in Genesis 10:25 in respect to a man named Peleg. Peleg's name meant “division” or “earthquake,” and he received that name because “...***in his time the earth was divided...***” We can find similar examples in [Genesis 25:26](#), [Genesis 32:30](#), and [Genesis 35:8](#) as well.

Genesis 16:14 tells us that the place where the angel of the LORD spoke to Hagar also received a significant designation. The name chosen to commemorate that event was “*Beer Lahai Roi*” which means, “*The well of the Living One who sees me.*” This name ensured that others in the vicinity would recall the God who witnessed Hagar's plight and spoke to her.

“So Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram” (Genesis 16:15-16).

So Hagar returned to Abram's home to bear his child. It seems that Hagar must have told Abram and Sarai about what had taken place while she was gone because Abram named his son Ishmael, just as the angel of the LORD instructed her.

While it's easy to focus on Ishmael's birth in this passage, we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that Hagar bravely followed God's direction, even though it meant returning to a difficult situation. You see, Hagar understood that she was going back to a place where she had been mistreated once before. She also knew that Abram was unwilling to protect her if Sarai elected to mistreat her again.

But now, Hagar could return to Abram and Sarai with an attitude of confidence, secure in the knowledge that she was doing exactly what God wanted her to do. She also knew that the same God who appeared to her in the wilderness could do so again as she returned to the challenging situation she once sought to flee.

Hagar's example reminds us that God may not choose to remove us from a difficult situation. Instead, He may elect to strengthen us and encourage us in the midst of it.