

## Women in Scripture - A Personal Bible Study

Please read Genesis 16: 1-16, 21: 8-21

Then read the reflection provided below and take some time to consider the questions at the end of the reflection.

After your own meditation, perhaps you can reach out to friends or family and have a discussion about their thoughts on this remarkable part of the Bible.

If you have time, you can read some of the other Bible stories listed below.



### The More Things Change, The More They Stay The Same

In the Roman Catholic tradition, and in many other traditions who follow the Common Lectionary, we would not hear this story on a Sunday morning at church. We would have definitely heard of Abram and Sarai, who later become Abraham and Sarah, and their struggles to have a child and how God eventually blessed them with Isaac. If you only knew that part of the Abraham and Sarah story from Genesis, it would not give you much of a glimpse into what life was like in 20th Century BCE.

As we pick up the story, we are presented with the fact that Sarai and Abram have no children. In the culture of the time, Abraham could have legally left Sarai because she had not given him any children. She was in a precarious spot indeed, as being a divorced woman at the time would have placed her quite low in the social pecking order. With that in mind, Sarai comes up with a plan and decided to offer Abram her Egyptian slave girl, Hagar, to be a surrogate and provide Abram with a much-wanted heir. The old saying, "be careful what you wish for", seems to be appropriate in this circumstance. When Hagar becomes Abram's wife and then becomes pregnant, the relationship between the two ladies takes a nasty turn.

Now let's remember that for Hagar, this could have been a way to better her lot in life. Being chosen to bare a child for a wealthy man could have made her life easier. Even if Abraham didn't care for her, she would have been protected by her son, who would be Abraham's heir. In many ways, Sarai and Hagar are similar as they are both women with very few options. The childless Sarai is failing at the one thing that her society expected of her: being a mother. Hagar is a woman who is also disadvantaged in the culture because she is a foreigner from Egypt, and a slave.

For Hagar, this is like a reverse Exodus story, as after she runs away from Sarai, who was making her life miserable, she is told by the angel to return to her oppressor and to submit to her. She does as she is told with the promise that "God would multiply her offspring that they cannot be counted".

When we pick up the story in chapter 21, Hagar and Ishmael have been disadvantaged even more by the birth of Isaac. So much so, that Sarah wants rid of them both. She tells Abraham to cast them both out to avoid any confusion as to who Abraham's true heir would be. Abraham is very distressed by this, yet, the angel comes to him with a rather heartless (in my view) message for him to listen to Sarah and send them away. Once again, this is done with the promise that God would look after them.

At this point, I am putting myself in Hagar's shoes and it's not a good place. All she has done is exactly what she was told to do; first by Sarai, then by the angel and now by Abraham. And where has it left her? A single mother with no home, wandering in the wilderness, with nothing more than a little bit of bread and a skin of water. I am thinking that the promise made to her by the angel that there would be a great multitude descend from Ishmael must seem like a dream and not at all attainable. So much so that she finally gives up and lays the child in the bushes and walks away so she doesn't have to witness his death.

This takes place in the 20th century BCE, as we have mentioned earlier, but how much of this do we still see today? I know that in today's world, events would not have unfolded in the same manner as they did in our story, but yet

the outcome can still sound familiar. How often do young women end up as single mother's on the street with no permanent place to call home and at their wit's end? How many times is this a result of circumstances, or events beyond their control? Like Hagar, it can be hard for these ladies to believe that in spite of everything currently happening, God has big plans for them.

How many times do we miss the chance to be the angel that delivers this message to someone who needs to hear it? We need to move past the judgment seat, and move into the seats of compassion and understanding. We need to realize that not one of these women, when asked in elementary school what they wanted to be when they grew up, answered with, "a single mom living on the street". This was not the plan. And while it is true that some bad decisions may have contributed to where they find themselves, that is not a reason to turn our back on them. We have all made bad decisions; we are just fortunate that our bad decisions didn't have more dire outcomes.

Our story has a wonderful ending with God fulfilling the promise made to Hagar by the angel. Just reading the newspaper or watching the news will tell you that not all of our modern day stories have such favourable results. Although we are 4000 years removed from the time of Abraham and Sarah and many things have changed for the better, we still need to be aware that there are many things that still need to change. Women in our society are still fighting for things as basic as equal rights and equal pay. In many cases, they bare the lion's share of child care and care for the home.

On this World Day of Prayer, may we all seek God's guidance in how we can be instrumental in the changes that need to happen. How can we be the messenger of a new and better world? And most importantly, we would ask God to help us follow through on the hard work that needs to be done to make these changes reality.

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## Questions to Consider

What do you imagine Hagar's life was like up to the point where the story begins?

Name the power imbalances you see in this story.

Who are the Hagar's of today and how are they treated?

What are the similarities and differences between our societies?

How could this story be used in a worship service?

## Other Scripture stories about women:

### ***The Story of Jephthah's Daughter***

Judges 11: 1-11, 29-40

### ***The Story of Tamar***

2 Samuel 13: 1-22

### ***The Story of the Unnamed Woman***

Judges 19