CHAPTER V

SARAH AND HAGAR
There is a blessed family in the 12th chapter of the first book of the Holy Bible, Genesis. It is the family of Abram and Sarai, whose names the Lord changed to Abraham and Sarah respectively. It was a blessing that Abraham the godly, gracious man had an equally godly and gracious wife.

Jehovah said,

And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that Bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. 

(Gen.12: 2-3)

Spurgeon says,

Abraham had cause to praise God for Sarah and Sarah was grateful for Abraham. I have not the slightest doubt that Sarah's character owed its excellence very much to Abraham. I should not wonder, however, if we discover when all things are revealed that Abraham owed as much to Sarah. They probably learned from each other; sometimes the weaker comforted the
stronger, and often the stronger sustained the weaker. I should not wonder if a mutual interchange of their several graces tended to make them both rich in the things of God. Perhaps Abraham had not been all that Abraham was if Sarah had not been all that Sarah was.¹

Sarah was in life covered with the shield of the Lord as well as her husband, Abraham. While Abraham shines like a star of the first magnitude, Sarah with light so bright and pure shines with milder radiance, but with kindred luster. Spurgeon says, "The light of Manre, which is known under the name of Abraham, resolves itself into a double star when we apply the telescope of reflection and observation. To the common eye Abraham is the sole character, and ordinary people overlook his faithful spouse, but God does not overlook."²

Sarah is written among the worthies of faith who magnified the Lord. She was beautified with the virtues that adorn a woman. She performed her duties well as a wife, hostess, mother, and a believer. She performed admirably all the duties that were incumbent upon her, and we find no fault concerning her in that respect. As a wife she did well.
And Sarah died in Kirjath-arba; the same is Hebrew in the land of Canaan: and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her.

(Gen. 23:2)

She did well as a hostess. She felt it her duty to entertain her husband's guests. She was always ready to lay herself out to perform that which was one of the highest duties of a God-fearing household. Though she was a princess, she kneaded the dough and prepared the bread for the guests without any complaint, though the guests were unexpected:

And Abraham hastened into the tent unto Sarah, and said, Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes upon the hearth. (Gen. 18:6)

She did well as a mother in making her son an excellent man.

She was a good believer though she laughed once. It was a slip for the moment:

Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also? (Gen.18:12)
Sarah's faith is disclosed in Hebrews 11:11:

Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised.

Sarah was calm and quiet, and was not put in fear by any terror. She did not question when Abraham got a call from God to go from Ur of the Chaldees. They had to travel in burning sun rays, rain; they had to live among strangers and of other religions; and they had to live only in tents. In spite of all these troubles, Sarah kept quiet, calm trusting in God. Her husband's sudden disappearance together with her son Isaac and her husband's participation in war to rescue her nephew did not terrorize her. But the only incident which remained a dot in her life was that of taking her own decision regarding an heir instead of trusting in God.

In the semitic culture of about 2000 BC, people laid great stress on the need for married couples to have children who would carry on the family name. If the couple were childless, then they could adopt a servant and name him as their heir. Or the wife could give her husband one of her female servants as a substitute wife. Any resulting children
could continue the family line. But the first one only would have any legal rights as a wife.

Letters and inscriptions have been discovered at Nuzi in north-east Mesopotamia which show that these customs were common among the people of the Fertile Crescent about this time. Discoveries such as these have gone a long way to show that the stories of Abram, Isaac, and Jacob fit into the Middle Bronze Age period - that is between 2000 and 1550 BC.³ God promised Abraham for an heir even without asking:

And the Lord appeared unto Abram, and said,
Unto thy seed will I give this land. (Gen. 12:7)

When Lord in Abram's vision said that he is his shield, and his exceeding great reward, Abram said,

Lord God, what will thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus?

Behold, to me thou hast given no seed, and lo, one born in my house is mine heir.

(Gen. 15:2-3)
When Abram requested the Lord for an heir, the Lord God assured him and said that his own son would be his heir but not that servant and He also told Abram that his seeds would be countless just as the stars in the sky.

This shall not be there heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir... Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: so shall thy seed be. (Gen. 15: 4-5)

But both Sarai and Abram were old and past the age of conceiving. Though God promised to Abram that he should have a son and that thus he should be the father of nations, that blessing did not appear likely to come to him for there were no children born to Sarai, nor did there seem to be the possibility of any. Both were old and well stricken in years. It was not clear to Abram whether Sarai or some other might be the mother of the expected seed since no special mention was made of Sarai in the promise. Hence he hearkened to Sarai, when in her unbelief, she proposed that her maid should become his secondary wife. And such an act was right enough according to the custom of the times and of oriental nations.
And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing; I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai.

And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife.

(Gen.16: 2-3)

L.E.P. Erith says, "It is Sarah who has given up hope of bearing a son; and who, in accordance with the custom of the East, gives her maid to Abraham in order to obtain a son by proxy."  

Theodore H. Robinson observes that the characters are clearly brought out: Abram, kindly, patient and just, longing for a son, yet not suggesting means whereby he might obtain one;

Sarai, the typical Oriental woman, unable to endure the disgrace of childlessness, and willing to bear a son by proxy, yet bitterly jealous and unreasonable when the desired
event happens; Hagar, the slave, unable to behave modestly when she feels that she has risen above her mistress, and without strength of character to bear patiently her mistress' harshness."

Hagar began to behave herself proudly toward her mistress, and her mistress finding herself despised, complained to Abram, and began also to behave harshly toward her.

Sarai hurried to make God's covenant real. Without waiting for God's covenant to become true, she gave her advice to her husband. She might have felt very happy and she might have thought of herself greatly. She might have expected everything good and happy in her home. But what she received was "her mistress was despised in her eyes" (16:4). As Erith notes, "Hagar's attitude expresses the characteristic Eastern contempt for her barren mistress."6

The peace which was dwelling in her house vanished. Hagar would not brook the rule of her mistress when she found herself likely to be famous in the house. Sarai, the quiet, but queenly matron could not put up with the insults of her slave. Misunderstanding arose between Sarai and Abram. In that rage she said,
My wrong be upon thee: I have given my maid into thy bosom; and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes; the Lord judge between me and thee. (Gen. 16:5)

Abram was also involved in the wrong done by Sarai. He should have convinced Sarai to wait patiently until the covenant became true. But he didn't. He hearkened to her humanly advice. As a result the peace of their house disappeared: no light in their home, no happiness. Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, thy maid is in thy hand; do to her as it pleaseth thee" (Gen. 16:6). He might have said this to avoid the chaos that arose in his household. Sarai became hard and harsh to her maid. She troubled Hagar. Now there was no love between them which existed earlier. Unable to bear the tribulations at her mistress' house, Hagar left the place which was blessed by God.

And when Sarai dwelt hardly with her, she fled from her face. (Gen. 16:6)

The world had no pity in those days for slaves of any kind, much less for those who had left their master's house. Hagar went into the wilderness and she outlawed herself. She, in impatience, deliberately quit the house of
Abraham and left the abode of the chosen family. It was almost the only spot under heaven where the Lord God was known. Spurgeon observes,

She, an Egyptian, once benighted by the superstition worship of her country, had enjoyed the light of the knowledge of the true God for a while, and now she had turned her back on it. She could not but have marked Abraham's high character and sincere devotion. She must have seen his true and real faith in God and the way in which he endeavored to order his household aright. Whatever faults she may have perceived there, whatever errors she may have suffered from, she could not but have noticed that there was a great difference between Abraham's tent and the abodes of Egypt.

She quit the place of privilege. She renounced the high hopes which surrounded her, and in her fierce passion she rushed into wilderness without caring. All her hopes lie in Abraham's tent. But she left that place. She had a high destiny there but she flied from it. She did not know that she was a favoured woman in the sight of God.
Without knowing this she fled away from that which would have been her blessedness.

She sat near a fountain in her proud despair. It was the likeliest place for any passing traveller to find her. She might have thought that Abraham would repent his yielding to Sarai and send someone for her. She might have thought to die rather than return if nothing came for her help. Though she lived in a godly house, she conceived a dislike towards the God. It could be because of the harsh treatment received from her mistress or because of her high Egyptian spirit which would never yield to Lord Jehovah. She sat near the fountain and was godless and hopeless. She was crouching, half mad with pride and vexation, and stricken with a sullen despair. But she did not lift up her heart in prayer to God though she was helpless and hopeless.

She did not pray. She was willful, reckless and despairing, and hence she did not cry to the Lord for help. But her deep sorrow cried to Him. She was oppressed, and the Lord undertook for her. She was suffering heavily, and God, the All-pitiful heard her affliction.

While she was waiting near the fountain for some merchants or the wandering gypsies of the wilderness for help, no eye pitied her, no hand brought her deliverance.
But the Lord of love revealed His gracious nature to this forlorn one. She was found by the angel, though "she had not thought that God Himself would come after her. What was there about her that Jehovah should come out of His place to seek her? He came in unexpected grace as He is wont to do. He remembered the low estate of His handmaiden, and because His mercy endures forever, He found her by the fountain in the wilderness." The Lord heard Hagar's affliction. He looked forth from His glory upon that lost Egyptian woman who was in the deepest distress. And He came speedily to her Help.

Genesis chapter 16 verse 8 says, "Hagar, Sarai's maid, whence camest thou? and whither wilt thou go?" By asking these questions the Angel reminded Hagar that she was Sarai's maid whatever else she might be, wrought deep and piercing conviction, and gave her an exhortation. The question "whither wilt thou go?" could be about her going into the wilderness further and die there of thirst and hunger, back to all the cruelties of that benighted land, Egypt.

When Hagar replied, "I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai" (16:8), he gave her the exhortation to return to her mistress:
And the angel of the Lord said unto her, Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands. (Gen. 16:9)

No doubt, it was a hard message to her in her pride. But however hard the way, however humiliating the deed, Hagar was not spared. The angel made it clear to her that she was Sarai's maid, she should return to her mistress and she should submit herself to her mistress. This might have forced her to listen not only to her master but to her mistress since she was primarily her mistress' maid. She might have been surprised for she had never seen the august personage before, but He had seen her before and knew all about her. He made her know that she was under watchful care. She felt in her inmost soul that eyes of thoughtful love were fixed on her. Those holy eyes noticed all her sin and her duty.

The angel of the Lord, after speaking with Hagar, calling her by her name and working conviction in her heart and pointing out her duty, added rich promises:

And the angel of the Lord said unto her, 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 herd thy affliction.

(Gen. 16 : 10-11)

This promise might have been very unexpected and consoling to her. It was a promise to a runaway slave girl who lost the chance of gaining human grace. "Ishmael" signifies "God hears me," because the Lord heard her affliction. The angel then told her what this child should be who would be the joy of her heart:

And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against everyman, and everyman's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren. (Gen. 16: 12)

Though a part of the promise "His hand will be against everyman, and every man's hand against him" troubled her soul, the promise on the whole was a rich promise for a runaway slave girl who banished herself away from the house of divine favour. God restored her with His mercy.
Hager's experience was a very remarkable one. The Lord dealt graciously with her. He came in pity not in wrath:

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? (Gen. 16:13)

Spurgeon notes, "The all-seeing God had veiled Himself in that angelic form. That Divine one, whom we adore as the Son of God and the Son of Man, condescended to be the messenger of mercy to a poor slave woman who had run away from her mistress."

She acknowledged the living God and His observant love. Hagar knew no speaking to God until God spoke to her. But after He had spoken to her there was no silence. It is a well known fact that Hagar joined in the devotion of Abraham's family, but she never thought of God truly. She called him "The God that sees" after recognizing in deed and of a truth that the Lord lives for her.

Hagar knew that He must be God for she had been so strangely found out by Him. When she had gone to the uttermost of sun and sorrow, in the extremity of her lost
estate, He had found her out, and hence she called Him, "the God that sees me." In the presence of the Lord she felt overpowered and ready to yield. No rebellion remained within her. She made the best of her way home to the tent of Sarai. Her mistress was hard, but sin was harder. She would go back and bear the reproach and rebuke, for she had a promise hidden in her heart to sustain her; she should yet be the glad mother of a father of nations who should dwell in the presence of all his brethren.

She returned to Sarai surrounded with God, thinking that grace can deal with her. She resigned herself to her work, bathed in the sense of the divine oversight. Her heart was light within her because of the divine favour, and in that spirit she was subdued to the will of God. She did not mind Abram and Sarai's encouragement and acknowledgement because she knew that the Lord's eye was upon her and He was preparing great things for her.

Hagar uttered a sentence in her surprise: "Have I also here looked after him that seeth me?" (Gen. 16:13). This shows clearly that she was surprised that God should care for her. She would not have been surprised if she had loved God when she was in Sarai's tent because she could have understood His following her here. If she had known Him when she was with Abram, she could have understood that He should
remember her now. But she was a wild Egyptian who would not bow her knee to Jehovah. Though she had no wish nor thought for the living God, He looked after her, for whom nobody cared. He never thought of Him who had thought so much of her. She was startled as she remembered that she had never looked up to the observing one until that time. She worshipped Him under the title, "Thou God seest me" as she knew that the Lord was the seeing God. She worshipped fitly, thoughtfully, heartily, and intelligently.

It is to be observed that she worshipped Him beyond her knowledge, according to her apprehension for she said, "Have I here also looked after him?" as if she knew that she had not fully seen the Lord but had only looked at Him as He retreated from her.

Obedience is the best of worship. Her worship was true because it was followed by immediate practical obedience to the command of the Lord. She returned to her mistress and was subject to her.

God spoke to Abram and changed his as well as Sarai's name:

Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee. (Gen.17:5)
"And 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." (Gen. 17: 15-16)

L.E.P. Erith comments that "The change of name from Sarai to Sarah appears to have no etymological significance Sarai was probably an archaic form."¹⁰

Theodore H. Robinson says, "At the same time the woman through whom El Shaddai will fulfill his part in the covenant, is called Sarah, instead of Sarai. Once more we have to confess that the difference between the two names is not clear. Either might mean 'princess' in Hebrew, but, as the family is represented as coming from Mesopotamia, it is more likely that the Babylonian significance - 'queen' - is intended."¹¹

The Lord once again appeared to Abraham and repeated his covenant of a son:
And he said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. (Gen. 18:10)

Sarah, who was listening to their conversation from behind, laughed at the covenant that she would give birth to a son in that old age:

Now Abraham and Sarah were old and well stricken in age; and it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.

Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?

(Gen. 18: 11-12)

This is Sarah's weakness in not trusting the Lord, whose wrong led to chaos in their household. She did a second mistake by denying that she did not laugh, when questioned by the Lord. Theodore H. Robinson observes,

We have too the picture of Sarah, like a true Oriental woman, concealing herself from the visitors for whom she has cooked food, yet
listening to what is being said, and ashamed of the laughter which has been forced from her by the suggestion that these two old people are to have a son born to them. But we have also a very important note - perhaps the climax of the whole passage - "nothing is too hard for Jehovah" (18:17). As sole Lord of creation he could do as he pleased; it was he who had made natural laws, and therefore he could "suspend" them.12

The conversation between Sarah and the Lord went as follows:

And the Lord said unto Abraham, wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old?

Is any thing too hard for the Lord? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son.

Then Sarah denied, saying, I laughed not; for she was afraid. And he said, Nay; but thou didst laugh. (Gen. 18: 13-15)
As the appointed time came Sarah conceived and gave birth to a son whom they named "Isaac," which means "laughter."

And Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me."

And she said, who would have said unto Abraham, that Sarah should have given children suck; for if have born him a son in his old age. (Gen. 21:6-7)

Sarah gave this name because everybody would laugh at her for becoming a mother at such an age. Her narrow mindedness and jealousy is exhibited in her act of sending away Hagar and Ishmael. Sarah saw Isaac and Ishmael playing together at the weaning-festival and was filled with anger at the thought that there was someone who might claim a share in the inheritance:

And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking.

Therefore 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. (Gen. 21:9-10)
But it is to be noted that Abraham did not yield to Sarah in this advice until God spoke to him and advised him to hearken to Sarah. Abraham felt very sad to send away his child. But Sarah's selfishness could not understand his trouble. A woman who accepted her husband's request to call herself his sister instead of wife in order to save his life could not understand his feelings towards his son.

And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, she is my sister: and Abimelech king of Gerar sent, and took Sarah .... said he not unto me, she is my sister? and she, even she herself said, He is my brother: in the integrity of my heart and innocence of my hands have I done this.

(Gen. 20: 2-5)

And it came to pass, when he was come near to enter into Egypt, that he said unto Sarai his wife, Behold now, I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon :

Therefore it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see thee, that they shall say, This is his wife: and they will kill me, but they will save thee alive.
Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister: that it may be well with me for thy sake; and my soul shall live because of these.

(Gen. 12: 11-13)

Abraham, after hearing the Lord's advice, sent Hagar and Ishmael away. The language of the passage implies that Hagar carried him until she was compelled to lay him under a bush. Especially touching is the mother's dread of seeing her child die. But her tenderness was matched only by that of God Himself. He heard the cry and rescued the little one, showing Hagar where water might be found. It may well be that originally this story explained the name Ishmael "God hears"; these words are at all events the key to the whole narrative. It is just because God hears the cry of the sufferer at the last extremity that Ishmael grew up to be the founder of the archer tribe that in after years bore his name.

Abraham gave some bread and a bottle of water, put Ishmael on her shoulder and sent them away; "... and she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beasheba" (Gen. 21:14), the fountain near which God saw her, spoke to her when she fled from her mistress' house. When the bottle became empty, she left her child under a bush and sat a
little distance away, for she was not able to see the death of her child who was thirsty:

And the water was spent in the bottle, and she cast the child under one of the shrubs.

And she went, and sat her down over against him a good way off, as it were a bowshot: for she said, let me not see the death of the child. And she sat over against him, and lift up her voice, and wept.

(Gen. 21: 15-16)

To Hagar the affliction came in a very painful manner. The little water that she brought with her in her bottle was gone. Both were thirsty and there was no water. If she didn't give drink to her child, he would die and then she by-and-by must follow. She laid the boy down, giving him up in despair, and began to weep. But there was no real cause for her distress. She need not have thirsted because she was close by a well, the only thing that she failed to see in her grief. The distraction of her spirit made her look everywhere except to one place, where she would have found exactly what she wanted. Therefore God spoke to her and opened her eyes for that well of water. She went at once, filled her bottle, and gave her child drink:
What aileth thee, Hagar? fear not; for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is.

Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand; for I will make him a great nation.

And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went, and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad drink.

(Gen.21: 17-19)

Thus Sarah’s was a covenant of grace and Hagar’s a covenant of law. Though Ishmael was elder, she could not inherit his father’s possession. Issac walked by faith and hoped to be saved by faith, whereas Ishmael lived by work and hoped to be saved by his own good deeds. Had Hagar remembered her office, Sarah would never have driven her out.
REFERENCES


4. L.E.P. Erith 51.


6. L.E.P. Erith 51.


10. L.E.P. Erith 52.
