

PARASHAH THIRTEEN

Genesis 16:1-16; Isaiah 63:19-64:1; Galatians 4:21-31

Notes by Tim Hegg

Rationalizing Self-Reliance

Living by faith is not easy. Let me offer an illustration. I've watched salmon traversing the fish ladders as they make their way back to the spawning waters. It's a fight for life. Swimming against the descending current, they expend all their energy to jump, often only to be swept back by the flowing water. But time and time again they attempt the inevitable course of their determined destiny. And many make it to the calm waters of their breeding grounds.

Swimming against the current is tough—it requires set determination and perseverance. But that is what the life of faith is, and part of the current against which we swim is the godless culture of our world. We are constantly bombarded with the voice of the world, telling us that “everyone is doing it,” and that the ways of righteousness are provincial and outmoded. Nobody likes to be the “odd-man-out.” We all have a need to be accepted.

But what is even more difficult is when the voice of organized religion joins the crowd, and calls for doing away with God's eternal standards of righteousness. Swimming against the current of the religious norms of the day is even more difficult.

The story of Abram and Sarai continues in our *parashah*. What is immediately apparent, however, is that the single most important covenant issue, i.e., the birth of an heir to carry on the promises God had made to Abram, is still lacking. Apparently Sarai felt convinced the problem was hers, so she suggested a “fix” for the problem, one which was entirely reasonable and culturally accepted. It was not uncommon in the Ancient Near East for a barren wife to offer her maid servant as her surrogate in order to produce a legal heir for her husband.

The narrative gives strong hints, however, that the plan is ill-conceived. After alerting the reader that the lack of an heir is the primary issue, the text goes on to state (v. 1), “She [Sarai] had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar.” The Sages believed Hagar was the daughter of Pharaoh (though this may be far-fetched), given to Abram when, through the dream that God had given him, he realized Abram was a blessed, covenant partner of the Creator (chapter 13). The “Egyptian connection,” however, is still very much alive in the Abram household! Even Hagar's name emphasizes this, for הַגָּר, *hagar*, literally means “the stranger” or “sojourner.” Her foreignness is emphasized. Obviously, the Torah has nothing against strangers or foreigners. But in this case Hagar stands symbolically of those who are not part of the covenant promise and who therefore are not the recipients of God's covenant blessings (as our Apostolic section makes clear).

This reality points us to a very obvious lesson: we have really only one of two choices when we look for solutions to problems. Either we rely upon the strength of God, seeking to make life's decisions with His ways in mind, or we follow the current, doing things from our own strength and perspective—there really are no other alternatives. The deception is when we try to rationalize that our way of doing things is also “sanctified,” that “fitting in” with the norms of our culture is actually acceptable to God. Does it surprise you that in the text there is no hesitancy on the part of either Sarai or Abram?

Granted, they were at wits end over the situation, but still, one would have thought that a person as close to God as Abram, would have at least questioned whether this arrangement was what God intended in order to fulfill His promise. It appears that the commonly accepted, cultural norm for solving a problem like this was so well entrenched in the thinking of Abram and Sarai that they really did not give it a second thought. Culture had displaced conviction.

It was not as though they had forgotten about the hand of God in the everyday affairs of life. Sarai confesses, “See, now HaShem has restrained me from bearing” (v. 2). Sarai considers the fact that HaShem, for His own purposes, had kept her from conceiving, yet she attempts to find a way to overcome His actions. Let us never forget, resorting to fleshly means in order to get what we want will inevitably put us at odds with God’s plan. Often God puts “roadblocks” in our path because He wants to teach us yet another lesson in the school of faith. If we approach these roadblocks as just such blessings from His hand, then they will have their sanctifying effect upon us. If, however, we attempt to find a detour around them through our own ingenuity or craftiness, we will find ourselves not only failing to learn the lesson of faith, but struggling against the very hand of God. Yet we know that no one is able to stay His hand or question Him as to what He is doing (Dan 4:35). If we are to be the Master’s wine, we must be crushed. No one can drink grapes.

Another interesting note in the narrative, given for our instruction, is found in v. 3. Speaking of Hagar, Moses writes, “So Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her maidservant—after ten years of Abram’s dwelling in the land of Canaan.” Why the notice of time—ten years? Certainly it alerts us to the fact that both Abram and Sarai had been very patient, awaiting the arrival of the promised seed. But there may be another, more subtle aspect as well. Hagar had dwelt with Abram and Sarai for 10 years, and as such, she had become, as it were, part of the family. Now please don’t misunderstand me here—this text is not teaching us principles about non-family members living in our homes! Rather, if Hagar represents a foreign, non-covenant element in the life of Abram and Sarai, the lesson this “10 year” notice might highlight is simply that when the things of the world (for this is what Hagar represents) are with us continually for an extended period of time, they are far more easily accepted without really much consideration. When the ways of the world become normal to us, we lose the ability to see them as they truly are. John wrote, “Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1Jn 2:15).

It’s difficult to see Abram act as he does. Here is the “father of the faith” acting as though he had no faith. The Sages, not wanting to see any black mark upon the reputation of the patriarch, absolve him of any wrong doing in this matter. In taking Hagar for a second wife, he only complies with the unrelenting requests of his wife. In allowing Sarai to expel Hagar, he simply gives to Sarai the right to exercise her legal powers over a servant she owned. But does not Abram’s willingness to comply with his wife’s wishes remind us all too much of a similar story at the very beginning of Genesis? While I understand the motives of the Sages in this approach, as followers of Yeshua, we have come to realize that it is not the perfect man whom God uses and blesses (for if this were the case, He could use no one). But God rather redeems and cleanses sinners, enabling them to do His service. Abram is far from innocent in this matter! Where was his leadership? Why didn’t he consult God when the plan was first formulated? Why didn’t he assist Sarai in the difficult decision she had to make after Hagar’s conceited

arrogance made life in the home impossible? Once again, rather than seeing Abram as some spiritual giant, he is cast in the role of someone who, apart from God’s help, is a real weakling. And so it should be, for the “Father of the faithful” is not some one who never failed, but one who persevered in believing God even after he himself had failed. God does not take the strong and the mighty as trophies of His grace, but He rather sheds His mercies upon the weak and feeble in order to display His power and might in them. Here, then, is a second benefit of doing God’s will, God’s way. Not only is it a strengthening of our own faith, but utilizing God’s power in the midst of our inability gives Him the glory He deserves.

Note how the narrative of vv. 3–4 punctuates the events by the rapid introduction of verbs: Sarai *gives* Hagar, Abram *takes* her, *goes in* to her, and Hagar *conceives*. While Sarai and Abram had waited for over ten years to have the child Adonai had promised, the whole matter of Hagar’s conception occurs in a rapid cascade of verbs in one short sentence. Often it appears that our own way (rather than God’s way) “fixes” the problem immediately. But all that glitters is not gold.

The quick decision of Abram and Sarai to bring the promised son in their own power results in an eternal struggle that begins between Sarai and Hagar. The hand maid despises Sarai. And why not? She would be able to give to Abram what Sarai had failed to give: a son. As such, she envisioned herself taking the primary role as Abram’s wife, and putting Sarai out of the picture. But Sarai had far too much *chutzpah* to allow Hagar to be in control. She gives Abram the ultimatum: “may Adonai judge between you and me” (v. 5). Effectively this means: “it’s either Hagar or me—the situation cannot remain as it is.” Abram retorts that Hagar still belongs to Sarai, that is, he had no intentions of raising her to the level of a legal wife. Having confirmed her sovereignty over Hagar, Sarai expels her from the home.

All this seems very harsh to our way of thinking, and it should! Hagar had been used—a mere pawn in the chess game of Abram and Sarai to achieve their desired goal. It hardly seems possible that Hagar had any word in the whole matter. Here is a principle that is clear: disregarding God’s ways, and going my own way, will inevitably affect others as well. We do not live our lives in isolation. The consequences of sin may be multiplied many times over in the lives of those we touch. Of course, the opposite is also true: sowing acts of righteousness may result in a harvest of praise to the Almighty.

But the harsh treatment of Hagar by Sarai and Abram is matched and exceeded by the mercies of God. Though Hagar is clearly viewed as outside of God’s covenant promises, she is still His creation, and bears His image. Her helpless plight is overcome by the mercies of the God of all comfort. After being expelled from the home of Abram and Sarai, she meets God in the person of the Angel of HaShem, a face-to-face experience with the Sovereign of the universe. That the Angel is, in fact, the Almighty Himself is seen by the fact that He ascribes to Himself the power or ability to order the future, and to providentially secure the generations of Ishmael (v. 10): “I will greatly multiply your descendants.” No one could do this but God.

Apparently Hagar recognized that the One speaking to her was, in fact, God, for the text reads וַתִּקְרָא שֵׁם־יְהוָה הַדֹּבֵר אֵלֶיהָ אַתָּה אֱלֹהֵי רֹאִי, “and she called the name of HaShem, the One speaking to her, ‘You are a seeing God.’” The “invisible” God of Abram had revealed Himself in physical form to Hagar, a logical incongruity which the narrative expresses but does not attempt to resolve. Rashi notes that the word רֹאִי, *ro’iy*, is spelled with *chatif-qametz* because it is to be understood as a noun, not a verb. It is not “vision”

as the Stone edition has it (“You are a God of vision”), for the point is not that He makes someone else see, (by giving them a vision) but that He Himself sees, i.e., is involved in and directs the affairs of men. In His all wise providence He extends His mercy to Hagar, and supplies the need that she has. His mercy is not something determined by the circumstances, however, but flows from the unencumbered sovereignty of His love.

Yet there is a play on the term “see:” God is the One who “sees,” that is, Who supplies the needs of mankind, but He does this by being “seen.” Hagar concludes: “Have I even remained alive here after seeing Him?” And Moses adds: “Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi” (בְּאֵר לְחַי רֹאֵי), literally, “the well that belongs to one who lives while seeing.” God supplies our needs by revealing Himself to us. In the ultimate sense, He is our “well,” our supply for all of life’s needs.

Hagar is instructed to return and submit to Sarai, but only after a prophecy is given regarding the son she would bear. His name, divinely given, would forever remind us of the fact that God had intervened and heard the cries of his mother. But the prophetic word regarding Ishmael is hardly a blessing. He and the people of his clan would not be people of shalom, but of war. Thus, the stage is set for the unending battle between the “son of the flesh” and the “son of promise,” a battle which still rages today, in both the physical and spiritual realms.

So Hagar returns and bears a son to Abram and names him *ישמעאל*, *Ishmael*, from the Hebrew *shama’*, “to hear” and *el*, “God.” God had “heard” and responded. One can only imagine the scene in Abram’s camp! Apparently Hagar related her experience to Sarai, and she was allowed to stay. But the situation could not have been good. Relying upon the flesh would have on-going consequences for the clan of Abram. A man of war, not peace, was about to be born within his home.

The *haftarah* ties together with our *parashah* by evoking the motif of Israel as cast away from God, even as Hagar was cast out of the home of Abram and Sarai. Moreover, Israel, in her disobedience, acts as though Abraham was not his father (Is 63:16), though the prophet’s cry is that God would show favor to Israel, much like He took pity on Hagar.

Paul, in the Apostolic section, has woven a fine midrash on the Hagar story, and especially upon the children produced by Hagar and Sarah. Ishmael is a son of the flesh, that is, brought through the fleshly endeavors of Abram. Isaac, on the other hand, is the son of promise—the son given by God and received by Sarah and Abraham on the basis of faith (since they were beyond child bearing age). He parallels Ishmael, the son of the flesh, to those who believe that they can find right-standing with God (covenant relationship) on the basis of their ethnic status as Jews (relying upon the flesh), and especially to those Gentiles who believe that becoming proselytes (being circumcised) would provide them with Jewish status, and thus covenant membership. Isaac, on the other hand, stands in Paul’s midrash for those who, without reliance upon the flesh, become covenant members by identifying with the true Son, the Son of the Promise. Such identity is achieved by faith as contrasted with the flesh. Those who think they can achieve righteous standing before God on the basis of their ethnic status as Jews, are actually in a state of condemnation and slavery. Those, however, who come to God through faith in Yeshua, are sons indeed, and enjoy the true freedom that this sonship brings.

Thoughts on the Location of Mt. Sinai

In v. 25, Paul describes Mt. Sinai as “in Arabia” (Ἀραβία, *arabia*). As a result, there are those who take this as additional proof for the theory that the historical Mt. Sinai is not in the Sinai Peninsula but much farther east, in what is currently known as Saudi Arabia. Admittedly, the exact location of Mt. Sinai is shrouded in history. Traditionally, two sites have been given the most attention by scholars and archaeologists. The one most often considered is Jebel Musa (“mountain of Moses” in Arabic), in the southern regions of the Sinai Peninsula. The identification of Jebel Musa as the historical Mt. Sinai goes back as far as Eusebius (4th Century CE). Other scholars have suggested a site in the northern regions of the Sinai Peninsula. Many other locations have been proposed as well, but more recently the late Ron Wyatt along with several other “treasure hunters” (Robert Cornuke and Larry Williams) have reintroduced the old notion (first suggested by Charles Beke in 1878) that Mt. Sinai is east of the eastern leg of the Red Sea, at Jebel el-Lawz, the highest peak in the NW Saudi Arabian Region. Wyatt claimed to have found evidence of the Red Sea crossing at Newaba in the Gulf of Akaba. All of this was popularized in several books (Williams, *The Mountain of Moses: the Discovery of Mt. Sinai* [1990]; Howard Blum, *The Discovery of the True Mt. Sinai* [1998]) and particularly in a TV documentary “The Search for the Real Mt. Sinai” aired on PBS. Beyond the supposed artifacts (burnt rocks, pillars, etc.) that Wyatt and others list as evidence to support their claims, the primary impetus for locating Mt. Sinai in Saudi Arabia is Wyatt’s theory that the Newaba crossing had to be the historical place where the waters of the Red Sea were opened for Israel at the exodus. He based this primarily on supposed Egyptian chariot wheels found at the bottom of the sea at this place, but his findings have been almost universally refuted by archaeologists. Beyond that, the three foundational assumptions for Mt. Sinai being in Saudi Arabia are: (1) that the Sinai Peninsula was part of Egypt at the time of the exodus, so Israel did not actually “leave Egypt” until they crossed into modern day Saudi Arabia; (2) Mt. Sinai is in Midian, which is east of the Gulf of Akaba; and (3) Gal 4:25 states that Mt. Sinai is in Arabia. But there are major problems with all three of these arguments.

As to the idea that the Sinai Peninsula was ruled by Egypt at the time of the exodus, no data supports this. Modern maps do include the Sinai Peninsula within the boundaries of Egypt. However, 3500 years ago, that was not the case. Ex 13:18–20 states that when Israel left Sukkoth, they “went up from Egypt,” meaning they “left Egypt.” It is true that Egypt sent military support to guard mining operations at the copper and turquoise mines in the Sinai, but these were only seasonal (Jan–Apr). Moreover, that military guards were necessary shows that the region was not considered within the boundaries of Egypt itself. Additionally, archaeological evidence supports the findings of Egyptian annals that during the period of the exodus, such military expeditions were infrequent. Further, evidence for an Egyptian garrison outpost in the Sinai is found only in the northern regions of the peninsula offering a good reason why God led the Israelites to the southern regions (Ex 13:17). The reason given was that “The people might change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt.” An Egyptian garrison in the north would have presented the possibility of a military clash. Additionally, the fact that this verse says they would “return to Egypt” indicates that the Sinai Peninsula was considered outside of Egypt’s borders.

Secondly, it is obvious that Moses, upon leaving Egypt when he was 40, went to the

region of Midian which is in modern Saudi Arabia. However, it appears that Moses, in tending Jethro's flocks, travelled away from Midian into the Sinai where he encountered the presence of God at the burning bush. The various texts do not support the fact that Mt. Sinai is itself in Midian.

Thirdly, the use of Gal 4:25 to pinpoint Mt. Sinai in Saudi Arabia is anachronistic. In Paul's day, the term "Arabia" included the Sinai Peninsula. Strabo, a Greek from Pontus (ca. 64 BCE–25 CE), wrote an account of his travels in which Arabia is described as having its eastern border at the Persian Gulf and its western border at the East Side of the Nile River. This means that Strabo understood the entire Arabian Peninsula and the Sinai Peninsula to be included in First Century Arabia (*Geography* 16:4:2; 17:1:21, 24-26, 30, 31). Likewise, Herodotus, a 5th Century BCE historian, calls the entire region east of the Nile and the Pelusian Branch, from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea, "Arabia," and its population "Arabs" (*The Persian Wars* 2:8, 15, 19, 30, 75, 124, 158). Thus, Paul uses the term "Arabia" as it was understood in his day, which included the Sinai Peninsula. But this does not prove that Mt. Sinai was in modern Saudi Arabia.

Perhaps the clincher is Deut 1:2 which states that "It is eleven days' journey from Horeb by the way of Mount Seir to Kadesh-barnea." It would be impossible to march more than 2 million Israelites through the difficult terrain from Jebel el-Lawz to Kadesh Barnea in that time-frame.

What is the primary lesson we learn from the Torah *parashah* and its related readings? It is that we must live by faith, remaining faithful to His instructions, trusting that God's word is true and that He will fulfill His word of promise to us. Will we receive from God the promise of His salvation on the basis of faith, or will we strive to find our own way, and think that we know better than the Almighty? Will we allow the drone of voices from the godless culture of our world to affect our daily decisions, or will we seek the face of God, and commit ourselves to a life of faith that trusts Him even in the midst of what seems impossible? May He strengthen us to walk humbly before Him, living out the life of faith that He has revealed to us in His word, both written and incarnate.