

## The Faiths of Sarai and Hagar - Genesis 16:1-16<sup>1</sup>

**Before the Lesson** - Prepare AV equipment to show the Rhianna Giddons' video of the song, "Julie". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYg4PEaYQ58> . (Click on CC at the bottom of the screen to see the lyrics.) Print the handout, "The Faiths of Sarai and Hagar," for the Transformational Exercise.

**Fellowship Question:** (Use one of these to break the ice, begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

### Information

Over the past several weeks, we've noticed how Abram has grown in his faith. We've also noticed that he is terribly human. To prevent a risk of losing his life, he offers Sarai, his wife, to Pharaoh. His plot works better than he had hoped. Abram fared well.

But what about Sarai? How did she fare? Was this a fair deal for her?

For traditional (European-American trained, male) scholars, Sarai was locked in an unfortunate situation. Culturally, in this patriarchal society, women were considered property. Men were superior and authoritative.

Some scholars, especially women scholars – and especially Black American women scholars – challenge us to read these texts through feminine eyes, through a minority lens. We will use both types of scholars for today's lesson.

God gives Abram several revelations in which God promises descendants, yet Abram has no children. Abram attempts different schemes and interpretations to "help God out." None of those schemes work, however. And, thus far, God has not been not clear that the descendants would come through Sarai.

- Have a class member read Genesis 15:3-4.

Today, we will take a closer look at this promise – but through the eyes of Sarai.

"The names 'Sarai' and 'Sarah' occur more frequently than the name of any other woman in the Bible, fifty-five times in the First Testament and four times in the New Testament."<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This lesson is copyrighted by Dr. Rick Jordan, Great Bible Teachers, Inc, 2023. More lessons may be found at [greatbibleteachers.com](http://greatbibleteachers.com).

<sup>2</sup> Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 30.

We are going to look at Sarai (and later, Hagar) through the eyes of some womanist Biblical scholars.

“Womanist” may be a new word to you.

“Most simply, womanism is black women’s feminism... We ask questions about power, authority, voice, agency, hierarchy, inclusion, and exclusion... Womanist interpretation does not privilege the embodiment and experiences of black women at the expense of other members of the interpretive community... Rather, ... womanist interpretation makes room at the table of discourse for the perspectives of the least privileged among our community...”<sup>3</sup>

“A womanist... is aware that traditional interpretations of sacred texts and interpretive frameworks constructed by malestream biblical scholars and religious specialists, including missionaries, primarily serve the self-interests of men and the white majority. Black women and others have too often been the object and borne the brunt of oppressive biblical interpretations and theologies that permit, justify, or ignore violence perpetrated against their bodies, against their souls.... The truths or teachings of these missional and/or religious specialists have primarily consisted of creeds, rituals, and doctrines either detached from social justice concerns and/or indifferent to violence, such as slavery.”<sup>4</sup>

What we know of Sarai so far is only that she is married to Abram (who is ten years her senior) and that she has borne no child. We also know that Abram used her for his benefit by giving her to Pharaoh.

“The deception is for [Abram’s] benefit, not hers... He relinquished her to the pharaoh and accepted a rich settlement for his loss... A hip-hop womanist reading of this text would say that he pimped her out. This behavior on the part of the great patriarch has proved quite vexing to generations of interpreters. ... [T]here is value in honoring Sarah as a survivor of sexual violence and domestic abuse and acknowledging her partner’s complicity in that abuse. That is the plain truth for which womanist truth-telling calls.”<sup>5</sup>

Can we assume that Sarai and Abram have talked about God’s promise?

God promises to make Abram the father of a great people. Somehow. Obviously, Sarai knows about Lot – and how that plot did not work (Abram’s adoption of Lot to make him an heir) and she knows about Eliezer, Abram’s servant, and how God has said that plan is not going to work either. Now, God says that the new people will come from Abram’s seed. But Sarai is not the best seedbed.

---

<sup>3</sup> Gafney, 6,7.

<sup>4</sup> Mitzi J. Smith, “‘Knowing More than is Good for One’: A Womanist Interrogation of the Matthean Great Commission”, in *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader*, ed. Mitzi J. Smith (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 242.

<sup>5</sup> Gafney, 32, 33.

- Have a class member read Genesis 16:1-2.

What might we deduce about Sarai's faith from this new plan? (She believes in the promise; she wants to help God out; she is not sure that God and Abram have "got this"; etc.)

"Barrenness is an agricultural term implying that the soil – Sarai's womb – is inhospitable to life."<sup>6</sup>

- Have a class member read Genesis 16:3-5.

"Within biblical patriarchy, children define a woman's status.... It was better to endure the humiliation of having one's husband produce a son by another woman than to remain barren. Sarai does not seem to be motivated by seeing God's promise to Abram fulfilled, not by the desire of her husband for a son, but rather by her own standing, which is diminished by her barrenness."<sup>7</sup>

Who is this Hagar? What can we infer from the context? Where was her home? (Egypt) How did she come to be with Sarai? (We are not told, but it is possible that she was part of the booty that Pharaoh gave Abram) What is her role? (She is a slave to Sarai.)

"The tradition of English versions that render this as 'maid' or 'handmaiden' imposes a misleading sense of European gentility on the sociology of the story. The point is that Hagar belongs to Sarai as property."<sup>8</sup>

"In a later section of the midrash on Genesis, Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai said that to compensate her for her troubles, the pharaoh gave Sarai his daughter Hagar, as reparations."<sup>9</sup>

"Her name... is not *her* name: HaGar means 'the foreigner,' 'alien,' or 'sojourner' in Biblical Hebrew.... It strains credulity to imagine an Egyptian mother naming her child 'alien' in the language of the people to whom she will be subjected to in servitude, and not just because HaGar is masculine in Hebrew."<sup>10</sup>

How could Sarai, a victim of sexual exploitation herself, offer her female slave as a victim of sexual exploitation?

Does Abram have a choice in whether to have sex with Hagar or not?

---

<sup>6</sup> Gafney, 30.

<sup>7</sup> Miguel A. De La Torre, *Genesis*, Belief Theological Commentary on the Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 172.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 67.

<sup>9</sup> Gafney, 33.

<sup>10</sup> Gafney, 40.

“Upon being given Hagar, Abram ‘takes’ her. If we are not careful, in order to justify the faith’s patriarch, we might excuse his actions as simply acceptable for that time. Still, the Hebrew word used to describe Hagar is *shipnah*, which originally connoted ‘virgin slave girl.’ Hagar was a younger woman who was forced to have sex with Abram, an eighty-five-year-old man.”<sup>11</sup>

- Have a class member read Genesis 16:6-12.

Once she has conceived, what is Hagar’s attitude toward Sarai?

“Many biblical interpreters have portrayed Hagar as sassy or haughty. Once she was with child, and Sarai was not, we assume Hagar rubbed Sarai’s nose in her barrenness. But could it be that Hagar was simply traumatized and resentful that her mistress offered her up for rape?”<sup>12</sup>

“It may be that Hagar regards Sarai as nothing and/or curses her because Sarai uses Hagar’s body for her own reproductive purposes. Why should a sex-slave, forced into gestating someone else’s child, think highly of or bless her enslaver?”<sup>13</sup>

To understand the dynamics that may have been going on between Sarai and Hagar, let’s watch this video of a slave-owning woman and her slave in conversation as Union soldiers approach the plantation.

[Show the Rhianna Giddons’ video of the song, “Julie”.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYg4PEaYQ58> ]

Sarai argues with Abram. (This is the first argument we have in the Bible between a husband and wife, by the way.)

What is Abram’s response? Does this make any sense at all, if Hagar’s baby is to be the child of the promise? What does this say about Abram’s faith? His ethics?

Hagar’s “flight denies Sarai’s claim of Hagar’s child as hers, heir to Abram.”<sup>14</sup>

“Hagar is on the underside of all the power curves in operation at that time. . .she is female, foreign, enslaved. She has one source of power: she is fertile; but she lacks autonomy over her own fertility.”<sup>15</sup>

Hagar flees.

“Hagar suffered from classism (a slave), racism (an Egyptian foreigner), and sexism (a woman raped by Abram). This story of the used and abused woman is a motif that resonates with many

---

<sup>11</sup> De la Torre, 173.

<sup>12</sup> De la Torre, 174.

<sup>13</sup> Gafney, 41.

<sup>14</sup> De la Torre, 175.

<sup>15</sup> Gafney, 41.

women of color.... As slaves, black women, like Hagar, were required to offer up their bodies at the whim of their masters. Not only were black female slaves required to satisfy their master's desires, but they also faced the humiliation and degradation of being 'rented out' to other white men as concubines."<sup>16</sup>

- Have a class member read Genesis 16:13-16.

"Hagar names God: *El Roi*, 'God of seeing,' meaning, 'Have I seen the one who sees me and lived to tell of it?' She is the only person in the canon to give God a name."<sup>17</sup>

"God sees the suffering of this marginalized woman.... God makes Hagar a promise comparable to the one made to Abram, minus the land: Hagar's descendants will be too numerous to count. God instructs her to name the child Ishmael, which means 'God hears,' because God heard Hagar's cries of distress.... Importantly, God's promise to Hagar indicates that God is not limited to Hebrews.... Hence Islam, according to Muslims, is the first Abrahamic faith because Ishmael was born before Isaac."<sup>18</sup>

In today's parlance, "Egyptian Lives Matter."

### **Transformational Exercise**

[Distribute the handout, "The Faiths of Sarai and Hagar."]

Christians recognize Abraham as "the father of our faith." so do Jews and Moslems. Today, we have been considering the two "mothers of faith": Sarai of Jews and Christians, and Hagar as mother of the Moslem faith.

For a few minutes, consider how your life journey and faith journey compares with the life and faith journeys of these two women. Use this handout with its questions to journal your reflections and insights.

As we have walked with Abram through his faith journey, we have noted four steps thus far: Belief, Trust, Obedience, Partnership. Which of these steps do you see in the stories of Sarai and Hagar?

Is your life story more like that of Sarai or Hagar? In what ways?

Is your faith story more like that of Sarai or Hagar? In what ways?

What is one take away that you want to remember from today's lesson?

[After a few minutes, invite class members to share their reflections and insights.]

---

<sup>16</sup> De la Torre, 177.

<sup>17</sup> Gafney, 43.

<sup>18</sup> De la Torre, 175f.

[Close in a prayer something like this: *You are the God who sees. We see the bright and brilliant and rich and powerful. You love these people, too. But you also see the invisible people - those who are abandoned, abused, needy, and powerless. We praise you for your love for all. We praise you for your good news for all. May we be bearers of that love and good news. Amen.*]

## **The Faiths of Sarai and Hagar**

As we have walked with Abram through his faith journey, we have noted four steps thus far: Belief, Trust, Obedience, Partnership. Which of these steps do you see in the stories of Sarai and Hagar?

Is your life story more like that of Sarai or Hagar? In what ways?

Is your faith story more like that of Sarai or Hagar? In what ways?

What is one take away that you want to remember from today's lesson?