

Hespeler, 21 June, 2020 © Scott McAndless

Genesis 21:8-21, Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17, Romans 6:1-11, Matthew 10:24-39

The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. Why, when he paused to think of it for even a moment, it practically made him sick to his stomach. He hadn't been able to sleep all night thinking about it and early in the morning, while it was still dark, he finally gave up even trying and got out of bed.

He went to the kitchen tent. The servants, as they were supposed to be, were already at work on the day's baking and he quickly grabbed the first loaf out of the oven. It was warm and had a firm crust – made with the better flour that would normally be reserved for Sarah and him and for their honoured guests, but he thought that, maybe, this time he could make an exception. He thrust the bread in his bag. Then he took a water skin – a good one that he was sure would not leak – and went to fill it from the well.

Abraham's African slaves lived in a group of tents a little separate from the main camp. He did not visit that neighbourhood often. And as he walked between the tents, you could not help but notice that many of them were shabby. The skins were all patched. They were, no doubt, quite leaky and had a bad smell. It was very distressing to Abraham to think that these poor slaves of his only ever got to use the hand-me-down tents when people like him were finished with them. It was just so maddening that that was how things were.

He found the tent of Hagar the Egyptian, the mother of his son Ishmael, and called softly for her. She came, very much surprised to see him at her door. It was very distressing to Abraham to think of how little time he had ever spent with her, how little he even knew her. But there was no time for that now. He told her that the decision had been made – that she and her son would both have to leave. They would have to go out into the desolate wastelands of Beersheba with nothing to sustain them but the bread and water that he had brought. "It is all very distressing to me on account of my son," Abraham said. "But I'm afraid that there is no choice. This is just the way that it has to be."

Hagar, strangely, seemed to have little sympathy for Abraham's distress. She was selfishly far more concerned with questions about how she and Ishmael might survive the harrowing journey that was being forced upon them. But then again, hadn't it always been so with Hagar? Even back when she had been sent into Abraham by her mistress, she had hardly seemed concerned at all with the suffering that Sarah had gone through – the anguish of not being able to have a child. She hadn't been concerned with the urgent matter of supplying Abraham with a son who could be his heir. Instead she got all worked up over how Abraham was raping her.

That... incident had been very distressing to Abraham as well, but it had been unavoidable. It was just what you did when your wife



couldn't have a child for you and there was a lovely young slave girl available. I mean, what was he supposed to do, allow Hagar to have control over her own body? The next thing you knew, she would want to be able to claim Ishmael as her own son! If you started to allow things like that to happen, before you knew it the very foundations of society would begin to collapse. The economy would crater, there would be fear and insecurity everywhere as people who didn't know their place demanded all sorts of change. Abraham shuddered at the very thought

As he lay awake in bed that night, Abraham had turned the question over and over in his head. He had wondered if this was really the right thing to do. He was supposed to be different from other people, after all. Yahweh, the LORD, blessed be his name, had chosen him specially and set him apart from all of the people of the other tribes who surrounded him. God would build a great nation out of him, that was the promise.

And, true, the promise was that his new son, Isaac, would be the one through whom that would happen, not Ishmael. But was it really auspicious to begin such a new nation by sending Hagar and the boy out into the desert with nothing but a water skin and a bag of bread? Did the supremacy of one nation really have to be built upon the repression of another? Something just seemed *wrong* with that and Abraham had wrestled with it all night long. Was it really what Yahweh wanted?

But finally, just before he rose, he did make peace with the idea. God had made him a promise, after all. Surely that promise extended even to Ishmael and God would take care of the boy so that Abraham didn't have to. Yes, yes, Abraham would just take care of the water skin and the bread – it was the least he could do. Abraham would do the very least and leave the rest up to God. Surely Yahweh didn't want Abraham to *stay* distressed after all.

The wilderness of Beersheba was extremely desolate in those days. There were no settlements and nomadic bands were very few and far between. Hagar and the young Ishmael had no clear direction to go and they stumbled onwards towards the south. They saw not one single human being all day and the scattered wildlife stayed far away from them.

Ishmael was 14 years old at that time. He was old enough to understand exactly how dire their situation was. He watched carefully as the bread in the bag grew less and less and with great alarm as the water skin grew thinner and thinner. But most of all his eyes turned to his mother. She was obviously concerned with the challenge that they were facing, but he did not see in her face the terror that he might have expected to find there. He took comfort from that, of course, but still it puzzled him. Finally, he had to ask her. "Mother," he said, "is there something that you know that I don't know? Why are you not afraid when we are facing such an enormous challenge?"

Hagar had, by that time, told her boy very little of his own story. She had not told him the story of how Abraham had become his father. She had known that it would have disturbed him and estranged him from the father that she had hoped might give him a better inheritance than a bag of bread and a skin of water. But

now, that didn't seem to matter so much. As they walked on, she told him the whole story of the worst night of her life and how she had felt so powerless in the bed of that vile old man.

She did not dwell on that part of the story, though, for that did not explain the hope that she carried with her now. She focussed, instead, on what happened afterwards. When Ishmael started to grow inside her, Sarah had been so jealous that Hagar had done what she could not and had been able to conceive. In her wrath, Sarah was so cruel towards her that Hagar felt as if she had no choice but to run away. Then she had not been able to take anything with her – not even a bag of bread and a skin of water. She had been truly terrified that she would die.

She had wandered until the hunger and the thirst began to make her see things. Ah, but what had she seen! There, in the midst of her delirium, she saw Yahweh, the God of Abraham, of all gods! Except it wasn't the God that old Abe had always spoken of. That God, at least when Abraham spoke of him, had only been concerned with how many cattle and goats Abraham had and, of course, whether he would have a son.

But when Hagar saw Yahweh, she noticed something very different. She saw a God who saw her, who saw all of the anguish and pain that she suffered and who loved her. On that day, Yahweh promised her that she would have a son and that he would become a great nation. It was a promise for *her*, not for Abraham. And, in return, Hagar named the God that she met in the desert. She called him El-roi, the God who sees. And on the strength of that vision, Hagar was able to go back and return to her mistress to find that Sarah had repented, somewhat, of her cruelty.

Hagar told Ishmael that the reason she was not afraid was because she knew that El-roi was still her God and still saw – that he saw the powerless and the persecuted and knowing that she was seen was enough.

The water skin ran out the next day. Hagar squeezed the last few drops into her son's mouth. When he looked at her, imploringly, she could only shake her head. Ishmael didn't say anything; there was nothing to be said. He wandered off to find the shade of some bush. He would sleep; if something didn't happen soon, he might not wake up.

Hagar had given more water to the boy than she had taken for herself and so she was, perhaps, in a worse state than him. Indeed, she could already feel the delirium coming upon her, the familiar delirium that had been there when she fled fourteen years ago. But, instead of seeing this as a reason to despair, this time she felt it was a sign of hope.

A strange light began to flash on the edge of her vision. She turned towards it and followed it. It led her on for a few more steps until it finally came to rest upon a flat rock on the floor of the desert. It was just a rock. It did not look much different from many of the other rocks that surrounded her. But the flashing light remained on it and did not shift and she fell to her knees before it. With the last of her fainting strength, she pushed against it and, to her surprise, it shifted just a little bit. There was a cavity underneath it and she immediately detected a dampness and a smell of water. She called out to her son.

The chances of stumbling on a well that has been dug in the desert and then hidden with a rock by a band of nomads have got to be infinitesimal. This was no accident; Hagar knew that her God, El-roi had seen her again. Hagar and Ishmael drank. They filled the skin. They lived and continued to wander deeper into the wilderness. And, as Ishmael grew and came into his full strength and maturity, he did well and went on to become the father of a great nation. And as for Abraham, well, did I mention that he was very distressed about the whole affair?

Hagar is a fascinating character in the Bible. She is totally powerless – a woman and a slave who is impregnated without anyone even thinking to ask what she thought about the whole matter. And yet, she is one of the few women in the Bible to receive a promise from God and the only woman who is given the incredible honour of giving a name to God. But I actually don't think that I have told the story of Hagar in this sermon. Other people, women in particular, have told her story better than I probably ever could. No, I set out to tell the story of the one person in the passage that I could identify with and that most of the people that I know could identify with. I said I want to tell the story of the person who has privilege – who has been given every opportunity to build and find control over his own life and who has been deeply blessed because of the way in which his society is structured. I set out to tell the story of the person who feels distressed when he notices the ways in which certain people have to live with systemic injustice and disadvantage and yet who feels quite powerless to do anything to change the system. I set out to tell the story from Abraham's point of view, which is the point of view of the Bible.

But even if the Bible does often take the point of view of the privileged and chosen one, I think there is still much in this story that should point out to us that our distress at how things are is not enough and that the God we are coming to know as various people in this world who have suffered from systemic injustice stand up and demand change, does not take the side of the poor, the forgotten and the outcasts simply in order that we might feel better in our distress about how things are. This story should push us to ask more of ourselves than that we feel a little bit of distress.