

15—THE BIRTH OF ISHMAEL

(Genesis 15–16)

Abram was beginning to worry. Jehovah had promised him a great posterity, yet he was getting to be an old man and still had no children. And he had little hope of children because his wife Sarai was barren.

When a child was born in Abram's household—the son of his steward, Eliezer—Abram wondered if this child would become his heir. But Jehovah spoke to him and said, "This child shall not be your heir, Abram. Your heir shall be your own seed." And again Jehovah showed Abram the stars of heaven and renewed his promise that Abram's seed would indeed possess the land and would be as numerous as the stars.

"How shall I know?" asked Abram, still skeptical; he and Sarai were both old and Sarai was barren. And, besides that, the land he had been promised was possessed by other peoples.

"Take for me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old she-goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and young pigeon," said Jehovah. And Abram did as he was instructed.

Then, according to Jehovah's instructions, Abram cut each of the three animals in half down the middle and laid them in a row on the ground, each half against the other. He did not cut the birds but also laid them in the row. Abram then sat down to keep watch, and when birds of prey came upon the carcasses he drove them away.

When the sun was setting, a deep sleep came upon Abram and a great and terrible darkness fell over him. Then Jehovah again spoke: "Know of a surety," he said, "that your seed will be strangers in a land that is not theirs. They shall serve the people of that land and be afflicted by them for 400 years. But I will judge that land, and your seed will come out of her with great substance."

Jehovah continued: "You shall die and be buried at a good old age, but in the fourth generation I will bring your seed forth again when the Amorites are ripened in iniquity."

When it was fully dark, Jehovah caused a smoking furnace and a flaming torch to pass between the animal carcasses that Abram had laid out, and that day Jehovah swore a solemn covenant with Abram that all the land from the river of Egypt¹ to

the Euphrates would be given to his seed. Upon receiving Jehovah's vow—even his sworn oath—Abram could no longer doubt, but he did not understand how it could be done.

Sarai was still concerned that Jehovah's promise had not been fulfilled because of her inability to have children. As she contemplated the problem, she devised a plan that would make Abram a father. She would give her Egyptian handmaid, Hagar, to Abram as a concubine, or second wife.² With the plan firm in her mind, Sarai said to Abram, "Because the Lord has kept me from having children, go in unto my maid that perhaps I may obtain children through her." Abram was not convinced, but after ten more years had passed and he still had no children, he heeded Sarai's voice and took Hagar to be his wife because God commanded him to do so.³

Sarai's plan did not work as nicely as she had thought it might. For, once Hagar had conceived, she began to despise Sarai and to treat her badly. This, of course, upset Sarai and she complained to Abram. "I have given my maid into your bosom," Sarai lamented, "and when she saw that she conceived, she began to hate me."

Abram assured Sarai she was free to do with Hagar whatever seemed best to her, but when Sarai began to treat her harshly, Hagar fled into the wilderness.

² The main difference between a wife and a concubine was probably the fact that a concubine could be rejected or cast aside without a bill of divorcement, while a wife could not. There was no difference between the children of a wife and those of a concubine, and the latter were a supplementary family to the former. The names of the concubines' children are listed in the patriarchal genealogies, and their position and provision depend on their father's will. The state of concubinage was provided for by the Law of Moses and certainly also preceded that law. A concubine would generally be either (1) a Hebrew girl bought from her father, (2) a Gentile captive taken in war, (3) a foreign slave who had been bought, or (4) a Canaanite woman, bond or free. The rights of the first two were protected by the law (Exodus 21:7; Deuteronomy 21:10–14), but the third was unrecognized and the fourth prohibited. Some free Hebrew women also became concubines (see William Smith, *Dictionary of the Bible, GospelLink*, CD-ROM, s.v. "concubine").

³ Genesis does not say that God commanded Abram to take Hagar as a wife, but that fact is made clear in Doctrine and Covenants 132:34 and 65.

¹ The river of Egypt is Wadi El Arish in northern Sinai.

An angel found Hagar by a well on the way to Shur and confronted her. “Hagar, Sarai’s maid,” said the angel, “where did you come from and where are you going?”

“I am running away from the face of my mistress Sarai,” answered Hagar.

“If you will return to your mistress and submit yourself to her,” the angel said, “I will multiply your seed exceedingly. Your seed shall not be numbered because of the greatness of their number. You shall

bear a son and shall call him Ishmael,⁴ because God has heard your afflictions. Your son shall be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man’s hand against him. But he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.”

When the angel departed, Hagar obediently returned to the house of Abram, where she bore him a son whom she named Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Ishmael was born.

⁴ The name Ishmael means “God hears.”