

Genesis 16 Does God make mistakes?

Introduction

Life is sometimes a mess. It maybe that in any given situation it is someone's fault, but it is not always clear who that someone might be? However, even knowing the cause of a predicament does not resolve it. Older people will be familiar with the gifted comedians of a former age Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. Hardy's famous catch-phrase was: 'Well, here's another nice mess you've gotten me into!' In the United Kingdom, and increasingly in other parts of the English-speaking world the troubles of News International, the media empire of Rupert Murdoch, are never far away from the headlines. Eventually the cause of this crisis will emerge, but sadly too many people on its fringe appear to be suffering. Sir Paul Stephenson, former Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, and his assistant Commissioner John Yates have both resigned their posts for apparent errors of judgement in this case, but with politicians of the major Westminster parties so closely connected to the leading figures of this corporation, it is hard to see how they are not equally considered culpable for getting too close to some people who may have been operating on the wrong side of the law. Sadly there will be totally innocent people who will end up losing their jobs and paying the price for the wrongdoing of others.

Yet it is not just the prominent and powerful in society that makes mistakes. How often as parents do we hear the words ringing in our ears, 'but you said...'?! Maybe a treat was promised that could not be delivered; sometimes a later bedtime might have been sought and there might have been some ambiguity as to what was negotiated with respect with the family rules! However, there are situations when we raise issues with the Lord, because of something that happens that we think ought not to have done, or doesn't happen when it 'should have done'. For Abram and Sarai their big issue was childlessness. There were times when they were handling it okay, but on other occasions one or the other or possibly both of them were struggling with their plight. In a culture that advocated the taking of additional wives or concubines to address this very issue, their fellow citizens practising other religious beliefs would have insisted that this was a situation that could easily be resolved by lawful means. The issue for Abram and Sarai was this: would they stand by the marital arrangements they believed God has given them –monogamy- or would they attempt to assist the Lord by following the standard moral conventions of the day? The test then and in every generation for God's people is not just -is what I want to do lawful? Rather it is a different standard: how would God want me to act in this situation?

1. Undeserved Trouble (Genesis 16:1-6)

(a) **Sarai's Problem** (Gen.16:1a) *Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children.* This is a much bigger problem in our country than many people realise. The percentage of couples who will struggle to conceive a child naturally is claimed by some medical sources to be as high as one in six couples, which if correct is a staggeringly high proportion of the population. There are a wide variety of reasons for it from the delaying of pregnancies to safeguard careers in earlier years; the inability to afford the costs incurred by a reduced income or increased expenditure (or both!) following the birth of a child to a range of environmental or medical issues. What is clear, though, is the (almost) unchallenged assumption in our culture that anyone who wants a baby has a 'right' to have one, regardless of their personal or family circumstances. This human rights argument is an abuse of that legal provision and a usage that was never anticipated when that legislation was framed after the Second World War. The rights of the child that is conceived are rarely taken into

consideration, if at all, and as Christians our principles on this matter are strongly contested by a militant minority that has had huge influence in parliament for far too long. However, another current difficulty at the present time is that as a result of the easily-obtainable abortion service, the number of babies available for adoption is at an all-time low compared to the numbers of people who might like to adopt a young child. We need to pray for couples in this situation who are struggling with being unable to have children, but also at the same time thanking the Lord for the huge medical advances that have been made which can in a morally acceptable way provide a way that some of these couples can have children of their own to rear.

(b) **Sarai's Plan** (Gen.16:1b-4a) (i) An unfortunate opportunity (16:1b) *But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar;* Up to this point in the book, apart from various long lists of names, Genesis has mainly looked at the lives of prominent and powerful people. Here the principal character is someone at the other end of the social scale. The interest God will show in Hagar and her child will remind us that He is just as concerned about 'ordinary folk' as those in prominent positions. In Matthew 10:29-31 Jesus sought to impress this point on His followers by comparing their value to God with the common sparrow. *Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father.³⁰ And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.³¹ So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.* If God cares for these little birds, and the implications of the passage are that He does care for the wider creation, then be assured that He cares for you. Hagar, in human terms was in the worst possible category of humanity, as a possession of her mistress. It is hard for us to grasp that another human being can be traded as if they were a packet of cornflakes or a potted plant, but that was the plight she experienced. Sadly there are more people in that status in the world today than when William Wilberforce and his colleagues won their famous victory over slavery in the British Empire in 1807. Had it been God's intention for Sarai to possess Hagar? No! is the clear answer. She was one of the possessions Abram and Sarai acquired years earlier during their embarrassing stay in Egypt. At that time this couple were living outside God's plan for their lives. Genesis 12:16 notes that: *Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and **maidservants**, and camels.* This fact reminds us that although our past sins and failures are forgiven we are still partially shaped and influenced by what we have experienced in the past. There are blessings that result from past obedience, but also the affects of past disobedience to God. His grace is never cheap grace rather it is costly, obtained at the infinite cost of the precious blood of Jesus. (ii) An unwise suggestion (16:2-4a) *so she said to Abram, The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her. Abram agreed to what Sarai said.³ So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife.⁴ He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.* The life of Abram as seen in these chapters of Genesis has consisted in a series of tests. He had to overcome his natural ties to family and leave his native land. Then in Canaan the test of circumstances –famine- would he trust God to provide? Then a trial due to family tensions over herdsmen fighting over grazing rights for their cattle; next his courage was tested, would he attempt to rescue Lot at the risk of his own life? Then God allowed him the opportunity to resist a temptation to materialism, when the King of Sodom offered all kinds of material goods as a gift. Now (Gen.14:22-24), unlike in Egypt (Gen.12:16), Abram has learned to say 'no' to this temptation (These points highlighted by A.W. Pink, *Genesis*, p.173). The strength of this temptation that came from Sarai came about from a past failure, but in principle it might still have arisen. The legal documents that have survived from Syria, that would have been in force in the Canaanite culture around Haran made it plain that if a wife could not bear children for her husband then she should purchase a slave woman to carry out that duty on her behalf (V.P. Hamilton, *Genesis*, Vol.1., p. 444). It is legal –but that didn't make it right, then or now. We are called to do God's work in God's way in God's timescale. This

has never been easy in the past, in the present, nor will it be in the future either. Biblical morality during most of humanity's existence has been at variance with the majority opinion in the wider culture. 'Everybody's doing it' – so what! How does God view a prospective course of action is the approach His people have to take. Sometimes we will be greatly admired, like Mary Slessor, one of Scotland's most influential lady missionaries in western Nigeria; but don't count on it. More often a more negative perspective will be in the ascendancy, but we must follow His guidance because He knows the longer-term perspective about the right way to live.

(c) **Sarai's Predicament** (Gen.16:4b-6) *When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress* ⁵ *Then Sarai said to Abram, You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the Lord judge between you and me.* ⁶ *Your servant is in your hands, Abram said. Do with her whatever you think best. Then Sarai ill-treated Hagar; so she fled from her.* God is not a kill-joy. It is not difficult to predict that Hagar whose self-esteem must have been at rock-bottom would be euphoric at the thought of bearing the heir of master Abram. From being viewed as disposable as a used nappy she had become a person of worth and value who could hold her head up high. Hagar's apparent attitude problem may simply have been wanted to be treated as an equal human being now that she was bearing Master Abram's child. Verse 4b has been translated: *her mistress lost status in her estimation*; if this is a valid translation then it supports the point made here and is in line with many recent Bible commentators. We don't live in a hierarchical society where everyone has a rigid place in that system. In this context it is not difficult to sympathise with her plight. However, this decision led to tension between Abram and Sarai. He had followed his wife's advice and slept with Hagar, but when that had produced the desired outcome he is blamed by his wife for her predicament. Sarai fails to acknowledge that she made the first wrong judgement call. He ought to have questioned the appropriateness of her request, but didn't. Then Sarai blames Abram for Hagar's changed attitude and he responds by saying do what you want with her, she is your possession and has no rights! The final sad step here from Sarai is her abuse, possibly violence against a pregnant defenceless woman under her care. What is additionally problematic is that Hagar is never named by Abram or Sarai in these exchanges. The abuse she will suffer at Sarai's hands comes after there is a pre-existent lack of respect for Hagar. What is more Sarai's opening words in Genesis 16:5 are literally: *The violence done to me is because of you.* Hagar is being set up for unjust treatment. Abram had abused his position as Sarai's husband in Genesis 12 when they had gone to Egypt. And what is worse, he will repeat the offence in Genesis 20 in another place some years later. It is no surprise that in such a context with an absence of adequate respect for Sarai from her husband that she feeling insecure may want to 'secure' her place in the family by disposing of Hagar. The Bible does not portray the characters in its pages as 'angels'; they are flawed and imperfect human beings. This story here very clearly reminds us that abusive behaviour that goes unchallenged will probably be repeated and victims of abuse may be tempted sometimes to inflict their own pain on other vulnerable people. What does this passage teach us? God works with people who are sinners and inadequate to accomplish His goals. Sometimes people outside of church ranks think that regular churchgoers are (almost) perfect people; therefore, as they could never attain such a status invitations to church or exploring the Christian faith are declined. The clear lesson is that if God could accomplish so much through flawed people like Abram and Sarai, then be expectant about what He can accomplish through you –if you are wholly available to Him?

2. **Unexpected Mercy** (Genesis 16:7-9)

(a) **The person who met Hagar** (Genesis 16:7) *The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur.* Here is the first mention in the Bible of this very important person called in the Old Testament **the angel of the Lord**. The first person he speaks to is a slave and a fugitive. God saw the ill-treatment of Hagar and was outraged that a couple who claimed to be His followers would behave in such an inappropriate manner. In the light of this encounter, Hagar would I suspect have identified with the words in a psalm David wrote, many centuries later: *I sought the Lord, and He answered me; He delivered me from all my fears.* ⁵ *Those who look to Him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame.* ⁶ *This poor man called, and the Lord heard him; He saved him out of all his troubles.* ⁷ *The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him, and He delivers them* (Psalm 34:4-7). This figure is not a typical angel or even an archangel like Gabriel (Luke 1:19) or Michael (Daniel 10:13), it is a preincarnate manifestation of Jesus, the second person of the Trinity. H.C. Leupold, a prominent Lutheran Old Testament scholar, explains the reasons for this claim. First, this being explicitly identified Himself with Yahweh on a number of occasions. Secondly, individuals to whom He makes His presence known recognise Him as divine. Thirdly, the biblical writers identify Him with Yahweh. Fourth, the doctrine here implies plurality in the Godhead. This is consistent with the Hebrew terminology for deity which appears in plural form from its first usage in Genesis (Gen.1:26 *Let us make man...*) and interestingly in the Quran in Arabic similarly plural terminology is used with respect to Allah (confirmed by Muslim scholars to me). Fifth and finally the organic unity of Scripture would be broken if it could be proved that the central point in the Old Testament revelation was a creature angel, while that in the New is the incarnation of the God-man (H.C. Leupold, *Genesis*, pp.500-501). Exodus 3:1-6, the classic passage of God's revelation of Himself to Moses, confirms these points. *Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.* ² *There **the angel of the Lord** appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up.* ³ *So Moses thought, I will go over and see this strange sight— why the bush does not burn up.* ⁴ *When **the Lord** saw that he had gone over to look, **God called** to him from within the bush, Moses! Moses! And Moses said, Here I am.* ⁵ *Do not come any closer, God said. Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.* ⁶ *Then He said, I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid **to look at God.*** This incredible passage reminds us that God is aware of everything that happens. In Psalm 139:7-10 David makes this point that there is nowhere in all of creation where God cannot find us or observe what we are doing. ⁷ *Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?* ⁸ *If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.* ⁹ *If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,* ¹⁰ *even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.* This truth assures us that we are never alone, but also reminds us when tempted to do wrong that we are never out of God's sight and He takes a particular interest in watching over the most vulnerable people which are named repeatedly in the Old Testament as widows, orphans and asylum-seekers (For example, Exodus 22:21-22; Deuteronomy 14:29). God is a God of justice – wrongs will ultimately be righted if not in this life, then in the world to come.

(b) **The message given to Hagar** (Genesis 16:8-9) *And he said, Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going? I'm running away from my mistress Sarai, she answered.* ⁹ *Then the angel of the Lord told her, Go back to your mistress and submit to her.* Abram and Sarai had treated Hagar very badly, but the solution was not to run away from it, rather to deal with the issues in that unpromising place. Paul did exactly the same with the runaway slave Onesimus (see the book of Philemon for details). Did Hagar want simply to try and forget the problem had arisen and simply walk away? Almost certainly yes! However, God wanted Abram and Sarai to come to terms with what they had done and put right the wrong to

Hagar. It would never be the quality relationship we might have desired for them, but the Lord understood that for each of these three persons ‘sweeping the wrongdoing under the carpet’ would not have been the best means of closure to this incident. Yet God’s approach to resolution would not have been anticipated by any of the participants. In our society today, there are a proportion of men and women who have abused people under their care and who are living in self-denial pretending that it never happened. There are victims of these individuals who would rather never see the perpetrators of their pain again and who can blame them. Our police and court systems are often less than ideal means of resolutions of many of these situations, but can be a means of protecting the public from those who would seek to harm others. As a church, like other charitable and public bodies, we have protection policies in place to ensure our love and care for all within our church family is maintained. Hagar must have been terrified to go ‘home’, but she did not go alone as the Lord was with her to watch over and care for her. Numerous passages of Scripture affirm this promise to all God’s people, including you and me today. Psalm 91:1-2, for example: *He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. ² I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.*

3. **Unsought Blessings** (Genesis 16:10-16)

(a) **The Promise from God** (Gen.16:10-12)¹⁰*The angel added, I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count.*¹¹*The angel of the Lord also said to her: You are now with child and you will have a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard of your misery.*¹²*He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he will live in hostility towards all his brothers.* Hagar, willing to trust the divine messenger, agreed to return to Abram and Sarai. She has received unexpected mercy and will obtain unsought blessings, but only in the place where God had called her to be. A woman who thought she would never be permitted to have a child as a slave will not only have one child in the future, but so many *descendants that they will be too numerous to count* (Gen.16:10). Hagar you have been praying to have one child. I will give you many offspring. You are trusting Me and I will honour that beyond your greatest expectations. This insight fits so well with Paul’s words of prayer for the Ephesian Church in Ephesians 3:20-21: *Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, ²¹ to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.* Do you and I need to ask what this might mean in our personal circumstances re trusting God and obediently following Him? Do we need to ask how this might be applicable in our church circumstances at the present time? What is most important to grasp is that God keeps His promises. God reveals to Hagar that she is carrying a boy and says you should call him *Ishmael* (meaning ‘God hears’) because *the Lord has heard of your misery* (Gen.16:11). Or literally *Yahweh has been attentive to your humiliation* (Hamilton’s translation p.453). When Hagar had almost given up hope God stepped into to begin the transformation of her predicament. Note that this would probably happen gradually and require a fair bit of patience on her part, but the assurance from God enabled her to take the courageous steps required to bring a resolution to her situation.

(b) **The Proclamation by Hagar** (Gen.16:13-14)¹³*She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: You are the God who sees me, for she said, I have now seen the One who sees me.*¹⁴*That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.* How does she describe the One who has intervened in her situation? *You are the God who sees me, for she said, I have now seen the One who sees me* (Gen16:13b). the God who first heard her cry was the God who saw her need and responded to it. This is our God also who hears our cries and sees what we need to live our lives for Him day by day. Hagar was a transformed woman by this revelation from God. As we accept God’s Word and live in its light our lives also can be

transformed into the way of living He desires for us. Paul, in Romans 12:1-2, made the same point: *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God— this is your spiritual act of worship. ² Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is— His good, pleasing and perfect will.* The challenge to us is this: will I walk in God's way or go my own way? The blessings He has for us, though, are conditional upon our obedience to Him. Will we like Hagar without seeing proof of the outcome step out in faith and yield ourselves totally to Him?

(c) **The Birth of Ishmael** (Gen.16:15-16)¹⁵ *So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. ¹⁶ Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.* Hagar was a transformed woman. Abram and Sarai could not deny what they had witnessed upon her return. It was also a powerful rebuke to their mistreatment of Hagar. God valued her and so must they, a profoundly counter-cultural statement in that social context. How can we be certain that this is the case? Quite simply because the boy was named Ishmael; Hagar was still a slave; she had no right to even offer a name for the boy. The fact that her master and mistress obeyed the word of God, mediated through a slave, was proof of that. When you and I show something of the reality of God's transforming work in our lives other people will notice. They may not want to become Christians at that moment in time, but will acknowledge, if not to us then within themselves, something of what has taken place. The next thirteen years of life in this family were peaceable and blessed. Certainly not perfect, not least because the promised heir was still to be born, but the peace of God was upon them. In our lives as we walk by faith in the Lord we may retain many questions that puzzle us; we may experience difficult circumstances with which we struggle, but we can have a confidence that the Lord both hears our cries and sees our needs and will answer our prayers, for the glory of His name, Amen.