

Be Careful What You Wish For: A Classic Menage a Trois

Text Study on Sarah, Abraham and Hagar (Genesis 16:1-6)

by Dr. Anne Lapidus Lerner

INTRODUCTION

Genesis presents the stories of several families who might be expected to serve as paradigms for us: Eve and Adam, Sarah and Abraham and Hagar, Rebecca and Isaac, Rachel and Leah and Jacob and Bilhah and Zilpah. Just laying out the names gives us pause as to diverse family structures.

The stories are rich and complex, pushing us to wonder about the characters and how they were chosen as models of first families, whether of humanity or of the Israelites.

For the leader: [*Suggested answers follow questions*]

Attached are two different representations of the story – the text in the original Hebrew plus two English translations, and the other, a painting. The goal is to revisit a familiar text and read it through fresh eyes. Remember that the process of interpretation provides for more than one reasonable answer.

Let's start with the painting.

Look at Matthias Stom's "Sarah Leading Hagar to Abraham"¹ (c. 1638) without reading the text.



¹ I am grateful to my student Mimi Kaplan (JTS, List College), for having brought this painting to my attention and for having provided some explication.

Questions for discussion:

1. What is the first thing that you notice?
Three figures; different stages of (un)dress
2. Where are they looking? Why?
Sarah into space, Abraham at Sarah, Hagar at Abraham
3. What do their faces tell us?
No one is happy. Abraham looks almost angry; Sarah grits her teeth; Hagar is unsure.
4. What do their bodies tell us?
Is this the Abraham we usually think of? He seems old, emaciated, gaunt, leaning back on one elbow. Sarah is the strongest character. Hagar is clearly much younger; her full bare breast signals fertility.
5. How about their clothing?
Why is Abraham so scantily clad? Sarah is dressed like a pious matron. What about the hint of red in her clothing? Why is Hagar's dominant color red?
6. What do their hands and arms tell us?
Only two arms are fully and clearly visible: Abraham's right is resting in his lap, or maybe on his left knee, with his hand palm down. Hagar's left is also palm down and seems to be propelled, to the extent that it has any motion, by Sarah. Abraham's left arm is supporting him (significance of left?) but his palm is face up and open, as is Sarah's left palm. Are they in conversation?

Hagar uses her right (significance of right?) arm and hand to cover her body with her red dress (significance of color?). She has no agency as she is not self-propelled. Note that Sarah's left arm and Hagar's are parallel, but the hands are opposite.

"Manumission," sending from the hand, is a term for freeing slaves. How does the placement of Sarah's right arm and hand relate to that term?
7. What is the overall impact of the painting? How does it reinterpret the story?
No one is eager to go ahead with this plan.

For the leader:

Now that we studied the painting, let's turn to the biblical text and the two translations. Let's situate it in the context of the narrative of Abraham and Sarah. (Text can be found on the last page.)

Questions for discussion:

1. What precedes the opening of Genesis 16?
The "Covenant between the Pieces," Genesis 15, promises to Avram² both progeny and land.
2. How does it connect to chapter 16?
*Although the text does not indicate whether or not Abraham shared the news of God's covenant with Sarah, the *vav* introducing Genesis 16:1 means not "and" but rather "but." The promise of progeny is lovely, but the facts on the ground are that Sarai, since her first introduction in Genesis 11:30, has been known to be infertile. How will the covenant be fulfilled?*
3. How does the structure of 16:1 encapsulate the story that is to come? (Note that the verse opens with Sarai and closes with Hagar.)

² The passage in which God changes the names of Avram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah is in Genesis 17. Although I have kept Stom's use of Abraham and Sarah for that discussion, I am here reverting to the names as they appear in the text.

At its center are the words lo – “for him” or “to him” and lab – “for her” or “to her.” That is the core of the section as power moves from Sarai to Hagar and from what is good for him (Avram) to what is good for her (Sarai).

4. In sharp distinction from the NJPS translation, Lerner translates *eishet* as “the woman of,” not “the wife of.” Look at the other appearances of the same word: *eishet* and *ishah* (v.3) and their translations. What does that do to the relative status of the two women?
NJPS translates the same word as “wife” when it refers to Sarai and “concubine” when it refers to Hagar. The disparity between fixed rank and relative power essentially moves the story forward.
5. How does Sarai understand her infertility?
In the Hebrew Bible, it is God who controls wombs – opening and closing them. There was not a distinction between science and religion in the ancient world.
6. How does Sarai refer to Hagar? What does that tell us?
Sarai never calls Hagar by name, a clear erasure of Hagar’s personhood. She refers to her as a shiphchah, a slave, in this passage and later as an amah (slave) in Genesis 21:10.

When we do not acknowledge the identity of others, we can more easily mistreat them.

Because Hagar is a slave to Sarai, but a “woman” to Avram; her role is not clearly delineated. Role confusion bedevils this story.
7. What is Sarai’s purpose in giving Hagar to Avram?
Is it a fertility test for Avram?

As Cheryl Exum put it, “Neither Abraham nor Sarah is concerned with what this intimate encounter might mean for the other parties involved, but only with what he or she stands to gain.”

Neither Avram nor Sarai seems to care about what happens to Hagar. Sarai takes action when faced with a difficult situation.
8. How else might Avram have responded?
“But you are the one I love; that’s more important to me than children.”
“God will just have to figure this out; it’s in God’s hands, not ours.”
“This must be really hard for you to do.”
9. Is Hagar’s pregnancy a case of “be careful what you wish for”?
Note that, as Amy-Jill Levine puts it, “rather than be ‘built up’ through Hagar (16:2), the post-menopausal Sarai ‘became light’ in the slave’s eyes (16:4)” even as Hagar became heavier with her pregnancy.

Hagar seems to have conceived the first time Avram “came into” her, dispelling any suspicion that he had fertility issues.
10. Is there any justification for Sarai’s anger at Avram? Didn’t he just do what she proposed?
Maybe he should have opposed her plan.
11. Why is God supposed to judge between them?
There were no family therapists. God is “shofeit kol ba’aretz,” as Avram will call God in Genesis 18:25. As head of a clan Avram would normally adjudicate problems that arose within the clan. Because he is an interested party, Sarai calls on a higher authority.

Both times we hear Sarai’s voice in these verses she invokes God. She clearly feels that she has an understanding of God and a direct connection to God, independent of Avram’s.
12. Why does Avram return Hagar to Sarah?
Hagar is clearly Sarai’s slave, i.e., Sarai’s property. Avram relies on Sarai’s ability to see the “good” and implement it.

Hagar is moved from Avram's "lap" to Sarai's "hand" without being given voice.

13. What power does Hagar have in this situation?

Hagar takes the initiative and runs away from the place where she is being abused.

14. What is the source of the conflict between Sarai and Hagar? How are they similar?

One way of looking at it is that the women see things differently. The Hebrew word for "eyes" appears in 16:4 with reference to Hagar and in 16:6 with reference to Sarai. They have different perspectives.

The women take action in these verses; the man is passive when Sarai presents Hagar and uninvolved when Sarai accuses him of allowing Hagar to mistreat her.

Conclusion:

After thinking about Stom's representation of Genesis 16:3 and the biblical text, what have we learned about the biblical story? What have we learned about ourselves?

For the leader:

Notice the way that Stom picks up on the eyes and the hands in the biblical text. Little is known about his life. Did he have access to the Hebrew text? What translation did he read? Note that both appearances of "eyes" are hidden in the NJPS translation.

Avram's lap is nearly naked in the painting and hands and some arms are also visible.

Does Sarai's open palm indicate that Hagar will be back in her power?

This *ménage à trois*, two women and one man, is not going to end well.

We can read this as an instance of surrogacy, which, in these circumstances, was apparently not unheard of in the ancient world. This tale reinforces the need for absolute clarity in relationships.

At the same time, we see that emotions are unpredictable. Sarai's need to be "built up" becomes less important than her need for personal dignity once Hagar starts to dismiss her. We do not know Hagar's reaction to this plan, if she had one, but she may also not have anticipated that her pregnancy would make her feel superior or that she would act on those feelings.

Women – and men – have the right, the responsibility, to leave abusive situations.

Stepping back from the text, it is apparent that it is not presented as a model for our behavior within families or without. There is nothing prescriptive about this text. It is important to remember that, while we can learn from it, its goal is to present the somewhat rocky path that Avram's clan takes on its way to really becoming a people who hear God's voice.