

## Hagar and Ishmael. Redemption Stories

### Genesis 21: 8-21

Last week we read about Abraham's encounter with angels at Mamre, and this week we move on to a more troubling story, that of Sarah's servant girl, Hagar and her son by Abraham, Ishmael.

If only the characters in the Bible were more fully heroic, always perfectly behaved and unproblematic! If that were the case, we would be looking at stories which did not reflect the full, messy spectrum of humanity and God's love. If we gloss over these more complex accounts, we risk accepting a dangerously simplistic view of scripture on which to base our faith.

The problem starts because Abraham and Sarah take matters into their own hands. In human terms, this Abraham, who has been promised by God that his children will be as numerous as the stars in the sky, is off to a very poor start. His wife Sarah is beyond child-bearing age and he is no youngster, either. Sarah decides that the best short-cut is for her to allow her husband to sleep with her Egyptian slave, Hagar. (Genesis 16 1-2)

Hagar duly falls pregnant by Abraham, and she gives birth to a son, who she calls Ishmael, which means, "God hears" as instructed by an angel of the Lord.

God's plan has not changed, however. When the angels visit Abraham and Sarah at Mamre, they promise the couple that they will become parents within the year, and although Sarah laughs at the prospect, their promise is fulfilled and she gives birth to her own son, Isaac.

Jealousy and arguments simmer away between the two women. Although our translation of the Bible chooses the word "mocking" to describe Ishmael's behaviour towards Isaac, the word could equally mean "playing". Their childish games ignite Sarah's fury. This leads to a blazing row with Abraham, in which he agrees to send Hagar and Ishmael away into the desert, with just a skin of water and some food. It looks like a death sentence.

There are so many unsettling details here! Sarah's treatment of a slave girl as her property, who can be used as she chooses, given to breed a child and then rejected. Is Abraham showing signs of weakness, easily swayed by his wife by agreeing to her plans in the first place? What about the way in which he sends Hagar and their son away into the desert with barely enough refreshment for a day's journey, knowing that they are likely to die? Are they then out of sight and out of mind?

Where was God in this messy situation? Why didn't he intervene and put an early stop to this behaviour? Instead God tells Abraham not to be distressed and to "listen to whatever Sarah tells you." (verse 12)

These questions are ones which we continue to ask in our own day and situations.

Poor Hagar and Ishmael! Their desolation is obvious to us. Sarah and Abraham can't even use her proper name. She is just "that slave woman", in a society where names carry great meaning and purpose. Nameless and hopeless, and quickly running out of water, Hagar knows that her son will die and cannot face the prospect of seeing this happen. She puts Ishmael under a shady shrub out of her sight and prepares to die. Her cries are heart-wrenching.

In response to the question, "Where was God in all this?" the next part of this episode proves that he was there all along. His plan had always been to care for Hagar and Ishmael. However, it is in the depths of her despair and need that God is able to reach Hagar. Whereas Sarah and Abraham do not even dignify her with a name, the angel of the Lord calls her by name: "Hagar." He reminds her that she is special, known and loved, and, just like the angel told Mary, tells her "Do not be afraid."

Her vulnerable son, Ishmael is not left to die; they will be safe and protected. The boy's name is given a deeper significance: Ishmael means "God hears". God doesn't only hear the call of Sarah, who thought she was being so clever with her plans, but he hears the cry of the outcast, the voiceless. In the middle of all

the mess and cruelty which humans have created, God is able to work to create a new situation which redeems Hagar and Ishmael from their suffering.



Francesco Cozza: Hagar and Ishmael in the Desert

“Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.” (v. 18)

We see God’s redeeming nature in this story. Despite Sarah and Abraham wanting to direct the course of events to suit their understanding of God’s plans, and although there is great pain inflicted on Hagar and Ishmael, God is able to raise these damaged people to places of honour. “God was with the boy as he grew up”, and he became a skilled archer and got married.

The word “redeem” signifies restoration and recovery. It can signify the exchange of a voucher for something, buying something back, or when a slave is set free – or “redeemed”. People can have their reputation, their self-worth or dignity restored. Hagar and Ishmael are given dignity and a special place in history by God: they are redeemed.

It is no surprise that God’s redeeming nature is seen in his Son, Jesus. Our sins, the ways in which we have tried to go it alone and make our own path through life, have been set aside through his death and resurrection. When we make our confession during our service of Holy Communion, we pray that as forgiven people we will serve God “in newness of life” – which is all part of this story of redemption.

Serving God “in newness of life”, and helping to bring that new life to bear in even the most troubled situations is part of our role as Christians. You may think that you don’t have any great influence to do bring about change, but your words, prayers and actions can make a difference.

We can learn more about the stories of those whose voices have not been heard. We can speak up for people who can’t do so for themselves. We can pray for God to redeem difficult circumstances around the world, so that good may come out in the end. We can cry out, knowing that God hears us.

The challenge for each of us now is to change the word “can” – for we are certainly capable of doing these things – to “will”.