

RUSHING AHEAD OF GOD: AN EXPOSITION OF GENESIS 16:1–16

George Van Pelt Campbell

AN OLD PROVERB SAYS, “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” It articulates the obvious fact that it is foolish to rush ahead when the wise recognize reasons not to do so. The Bible teaches its own version of this sentiment in a story from the life of Abram: it is foolish and dangerous to rush ahead of God; wisdom calls for waiting on Him in faith.

THE IDEA OF THE PASSAGE

Genesis 16 shows the consequences of not waiting on God, a message that is important for Christians today. “The narrative of Genesis 16 is the first in a series of stories that portray the tension over the delay of the promise,”¹ that is, God’s seeming delay in fulfilling His promise to Abram that he would have a son. This is part of a larger pattern in the Abraham narratives. In Genesis 12:1–3 God promised Abram² that He would make him a blessing to the world by making his descendants become a nation in a land. Thus the Abraham narratives are domi-

George Van Pelt Campbell is Associate Professor of Sociology and Religion, Grove City College, Grove City, Pennsylvania.

¹ Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 315. Regarding chapters 16, 17, and 18:1–15, Walter Brueggemann adds, “In different ways, all three texts revolve around this issue of faith in a God whose promise tarries too long” (*Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1982], 151). John Calvin wrote, “Sarai, through the impatience of long delay, resorted to a method . . . at variance with the word of God” (*Commentary on Genesis* [reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965], 294). Ian Duguid presents a good example of accurate and applicable exposition of the Abram narratives in *Living in the Gap between Promise and Reality: The Gospel according to Abram* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1999).

² This article refers to Abram and Sarai, since their names were not changed to Abraham and Sarah until later (in Gen. 17).

nated by these two themes: a son from which the nation would come (15:4) and a land in which the nation would dwell. Genesis 12–15 is concerned primarily with God’s promise to Abram regarding the land, while Genesis 16–22 is devoted primarily to God’s promise of a son.

Both sections begin with a situation in which the promise is in jeopardy.³ When a famine occurred in the land to which God had brought Abram (12:10–12), he simply left the land without consulting God and without waiting for Him to supply his needs. This resulted in a number of problems. In Genesis 16 the promise of a son had been delayed for a long time. Again rather than waiting for God to provide, Abram, following Sarai, took the initiative without consulting God. This too resulted in a number of problems. So chapter 16 parallels 12:10–20, with both passages posing the question of how Abram would respond to unforeseen difficulties regarding the two major parts of God’s promise. “Just as the famine provided a test for Abram’s faith in the promise, so did this barrenness of his wife. . . . It is interesting to observe that Abram’s failure in Genesis 12 may have contributed to his failure in Genesis 16—he may have acquired Hagar in that trip to Egypt” (12:16).⁴

Genesis 16 deals specifically with the results of not waiting for God (vv. 1–6) and the proper response when waiting on Him is difficult (vv. 7–16). The point of the passage may be stated as follows: *Since failing to wait on God inevitably produces problems, believers should trust God and wait on Him, because He always sees them and never fails to know and hear their distress.*

GOD’S WAY IS ALWAYS THE BEST WAY (16:1–6)

The first six verses in Genesis 16 are bound together as a unit by a repeated structure.⁵

16:1–4a

- A. Tension: Sarai was barren (v. 1)
- B. Sarai’s speech: blaming the Lord (v. 2a)
- C. Abram acquiesced to Sarai regarding Hagar (v. 2b)
- D. Sarai gave Hagar to Abram (vv. 3–4)

³ Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 251.

⁴ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 319. See also Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis* (1888; reprint, Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1978), 2:15.

⁵ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 316–17.

16:4b–6

- A. Tension: Sarai was despised by Hagar (v. 4b)
- B. Sarai's speech: blaming Abram (v. 5)
- C. Abram acquiesced to Sarai regarding Hagar (v. 6a)
- D. Sarai treated Hagar harshly and Hagar fled (v. 6b)

Sarai is the key figure in the narrative and Abram merely responds passively to her initiatives. The parallelism between B and B' shows that Sarai blamed God for her first predicament and then blamed Abram for her second predicament. As will be discussed later, his response parallels Adam's passivity in the account of the Fall in Genesis 3. It also is similar to Jacob's passivity at the hands of Rachel and Leah, in, for example, 29:31–30:10.⁶

Dialogue carries the plot throughout this story, as is typical in biblical narrative.⁷ Speeches by Sarai, Abram, Hagar, and the angel of the Lord follow this pattern: Abram spoke once (16:6), Sarai spoke twice (vv. 2, 5), Hagar spoke two (or three) times (vv. 8, 13), and the angel of the Lord spoke four times (vv. 8, 9, 10, 11–12). Abram's limited speaking is consistent with his minor role in the story. Sarai and Hagar spoke more often, indicating their roles as major characters in the story. And the angel of the Lord spoke the most, thereby crystallizing the lesson of the story.

THE FRUSTRATION OF WAITING ON GOD (vv. 1–2a)

"Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, 'Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her'" (vv. 1–2a).⁸

Sarai's barrenness (11:30) was a problem for two reasons. First, for a couple in their culture to have no children was "a misfortune of overwhelming proportions."⁹

It was a serious matter for a man to be childless in the ancient world, for it left him without an heir. But it was even more calamitous for a woman: to have a great brood of children was a mark of success as a wife; to have

⁶ Ibid., 317.

⁷ Robert Alter analyzes this feature of the biblical narrative (*The Art of Biblical Narrative* [New York: Basic, 1981], 63–87), as does Shimon Bar-Efrat (*Narrative Art in the Bible* [New York: Clark, 1992], 64–77).

⁸ Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, Crossway Bibles (Wheaton, IL: Good News, 2001).

⁹ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985), 237.

none was ignominious failure. So throughout the ancient East polygamy was resorted to as a means of obviating childlessness. But wealthier wives preferred the practice of surrogate motherhood. . . . This practice of surrogate motherhood is attested throughout the ancient Orient from the third to the first millennium BC, from Babylon to Egypt. . . . Given the social mores of the ancient Near East, Sarai's suggestion was a perfectly proper and respectable course of action.¹⁰

Though this was not an act of sexual immorality, there was a manifest lack of trust in God.¹¹

The second reason this was a problem is that while God had promised Abram and Sarai that He would give them a son (15:4), a long period of time had passed since His promise was given, as mentioned in 16:1a and 3. The reference to the passing of time without the fulfilling of the promise is a recurring motif in the Abram narratives (v. 16; 17:1, 17, 24; 18:12; 21:5).¹² Having been promised a way out of her painful circumstance, Sarai was impatient for relief to come. She was frustrated because she had to wait for what she keenly desired.

Rebekah and Rachel were also barren, and for them also God's promise of a child was dependent on God's intervention, which served as a test of faith.¹³ The fact that this motif involves children is significant as well. It shows that God's people are often called on to wait regarding those things closest to their desires and dreams, things such as children, possessions, a sense of accomplishment, a sense of success, or the esteem of others.

Regarding the term for “servant” in 16:1 (שִׁפְחָה) Alter points out that “the tradition of English versions that render this as ‘maid’ or ‘handmaiden’ imposes a misleading sense of European gentility on the sociology of the story. The point is that Hagar belongs to Sarai as

¹⁰ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1994), 7. For discussion of surrogate motherhood laws in the ancient Near East see Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990, 444–45; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: A Translation and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 119–21; and Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 239.

¹¹ Most of the church fathers viewed this action as adultery. To deal with this they resorted to allegorical interpretations of the passage (Mark Sheridan, ed., *Genesis 12–50*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002], 41). However, Ambrose explained Abram's sexual activity by saying that “there is no condemnation for the offense that precedes the law but only one based on the law” (ibid., 43). And Augustine observed that “Abram is in no way to be branded as guilty concerning this concubine. For he dealt with her for the begetting of progeny, not for the gratification of lust” (ibid., 45). Calvin called it “something between fornication and marriage” (*Commentary on Genesis*, 197).

¹² Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 248.

¹³ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 319.

property, and the ensuing complications of their relationship build on that fundamental fact.”¹⁴

Interestingly Hagar was an Egyptian.¹⁵ This hints at a connection to 12:10–20, but it also serves to tie the story into the Israel-Egypt theme, which those reading the book could not miss since they had just exited Egypt.¹⁶ Here waiting and Egypt are tied together in a way that would become significant in 16:6.

Sailhamer comments on another interesting feature of Hagar’s being an Egyptian.

The mention of Hagar’s geographical origin appears to function as a connecting link with the geographical list immediately preceding the story (15:18–21), since in that list, the first geographical name is Egypt (15:18). If such a connection is intentional, then it appears that the author is attempting to position the account of Hagar (Gen. 16) so that her story is representative of those nations in the preceding list. A way was thus opened for the events in the life of Hagar and Abram to be interpreted within the larger theological context of Genesis and the Pentateuch where these lists of names occur.¹⁷

Kidner observes that “this chapter marks another stage in eliminating every means but miracle towards the promised birth.”¹⁸ God wants all believers to depend on Him, especially when it seems impossible for His promises to come true.

SOLUTIONS THAT LEAVE GOD OUT (vv. 2b–3)

“And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife” (vv. 2b–3).

Like Abram in 12:10–20, Sarai here took the initiative to solve her problems without trusting in the Lord’s promise. Sarai’s acknowledgement that God had prevented her from having children is indeed

¹⁴ Alter, *Genesis*, 67. Delitzsch states, “What a number of mishaps ensued from this course of action, which endeavored arbitrarily to bring about the fulfillment of the Divine promise instead of patiently waiting for it” (*A New Commentary on Genesis*, 17).

¹⁵ John H. Sailhamer points out that this story, which shows the problems that developed as a result of Abram taking an Egyptian wife, was intended by Moses to serve as a historical example to readers as to why the prohibition of taking foreign wives in Deuteronomy 7:1–6 is important (*The Pentateuch as Narrative* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995], 153).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1967), 126.

an expression of her faith that He is sovereign over such things as birth, but it also seems to be an expression of frustration with the Lord. This parallels Adam's blaming God for his sin (3:12).¹⁹ Sarai spoke about God but did not appeal to Him; instead she appealed to her husband. "She recognizes the Lord as Creator of life; however, she does not interpret her infertility in terms of God's promise. Her complaint condemns her for seizing the initiative from his hands. Without a word from God to authorize her scheme, she is guilty of synergism. Her plan to deal with the problem compares with Abram's in 12:11–13."²⁰ Furthermore it goes against God's implied preference for monogamy (2:24).²¹ Against Westermann, von Rad is correct in viewing this as "a great delinquency" on Sarai's part.²² Her plan was that by Hagar having a child Sarai might be "built up" through her. The verb "built up" (בָּנִי) is "an obvious word-play" on the term for "son" (בֵּן).²³

Since there was no immorality in Sarai's suggestion to Abram, but there was a lack of faith, the lesson from this incident for believers today is a warning not against immorality but against doing what seems perfectly proper but is apart from trust in God. The problem of infertility still troubles couples today. While contemporary culture differs from that of Abram and Sarai, the desire to overcome childlessness is still often very strong, and many new methods for attempting to over-

¹⁹ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 319.

²⁰ Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 251.

²¹ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 154. Kidner points out the Old Testament implication about polygamy. "Custom sanctioned this way of obtaining children (although the present story and chapter 30 are proof of its un wisdom)" (*Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, 126). This regular pattern of portraying polygamy followed by problems should be judged intentional. Calvin noted that "though polygamy had already prevailed among many; yet it was never left to the will of man, to abrogate that divine law by which two persons were mutually bound together" (*Commentary on Genesis*, 295).

²² Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. ed., Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 191. Brueggemann comments, "Theologically, the narrative asserts that Abram and Sarah did not believe the promise" (*Genesis*, 151). Calvin wrote, "The faith of both of them was defective" (*Commentary on Genesis*, 295). See Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary*, 238. Paul called it an act "according to the flesh" rather than "through promise" (Gal. 4:23). On Paul's use of this passage in Galatians 4:21–5:1 see Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 95–96.

²³ Speiser, *Genesis: A Translation and Commentary on Genesis*, 117. Calvin observed this wordplay. He also drew this lesson: "Meanwhile, when we see Abram, who, through so many years, had bravely contended like an invincible combatant, and had surmounted so many obstacles, now yielding, in a single moment, to temptation; who among us will not fear for himself in similar danger? Therefore, although we may have stood long and firmly in the faith, we must daily pray, that God would not lead us into temptation" (*Commentary on Genesis*, 296).

come infertility are available today, including adopting children from other countries, the use of frozen embryos, and surrogate childbearing. But even the use of a morally acceptable method for addressing this situation should not be undertaken apart from faith in the Lord.

The clause, “Abram listened to the voice of Sarai,” is particularly interesting, for it parallels 3:17, Adam “listened to the voice” of his wife Eve.²⁴ The clause “listened to the voice” (שָׁמַע לְקוֹל) is used in the Hebrew in only these two texts.²⁵ However, years later Abraham was more mature in his dealings with Sarah and Hagar (21:8–13). Sarah again told Abraham to “cast out” Hagar and her son (v. 10), but Abraham was “distressed” (v. 11) and then God spoke to him and gave him instructions (v. 12). Abraham hesitated; he did not simply “listen to the voice of his wife.” Because of the patriarch’s response God spoke to him and provided a solution to his dilemma. This suggests that if Abram had not listened to the voice of his wife in chapter 16, God would have revealed a solution. Instead, in this first instance Abram left no opportunity for God to provide for him.

Sailhamer points out further parallels between 3:2–6 and 16:1–4.

“The woman said to” (3:2); “Sarai said to” (16:2)

“You listened to your wife” (3:17); “Abram listened to the voice of Sarai” (16:2).

“She took some” (3:6); “Sarai . . . took” (16:3).

“She also gave some to her husband” (3:6); “she gave to her husband” (16:3).²⁶

These parallels, in addition to the fact that the term “curse” from 12:3 is used twice in 16:4–5 (translated “despise”),²⁷ justify Berg’s argument that “the author makes it clear that for him both narratives describe comparable events, but they are both accounts of a fall.”²⁸

Hagar was given to Abram as a “wife” (16:3). Alter points out that the term used here is the normal word for “wife” (אִשָּׁה), not the term for “concubine” (אִשָּׁה זָרָה).²⁹ This puts Hagar on Sarai’s level as a wife, a fact that sets Sarai’s bitter actions in verse 6 in bold relief.

Already in Genesis there is a long line of schemes to get blessing

²⁴ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 319; and Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 7.

²⁵ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 7.

²⁶ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 153.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁸ Berg, quoted in Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 8.

²⁹ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 68. For a discussion of the terms for “wife” and “concubine” in the Old Testament and in Genesis see Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17*, 446.

apart from God that failed (3:6–8; 4:3–7; 11:1–9; 12:10–20; 13:1–12; 14:21–24),³⁰ and this one failed too. It did give Abram a son, but not *the* son God intended, and in the end it caused far more problems than it solved, as 16:12 intimates, and as subsequent history demonstrates.

THE BACKFIRING OF HOMEMADE SOLUTIONS (v. 4)

“And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress” (v. 4).

Verse 4b is literally, “And she saw that she had conceived and her mistress was despised in her eyes.” The abruptness of this immediate and unexpected announcement communicates Sarai’s surprise and dismay. Her carefully wrought scheme backfired on her with a speed and a force that resulted in bitter rage. This is indicated by the word she used in verse 5 to describe her injury, רָחַץ, translated by Alter as “outrage.”³¹ Elsewhere it is often translated “violence,” and it occurs in 6:11 and 13 to describe the sins that prompted the Flood.³²

In fact both women looked with contempt on each other! Sarai’s plan clearly resulted in bitterness and conflict in that home.

The root רָחַץ, translated “looked with contempt” (16:4), is also used in 12:3, “Those who *despise* you I will curse.” Ross points out that this verb is “critical to the account. . . . In using this strong word to describe her attitude, the narrative is underscoring how much of a problem it was now going to be to fulfill the blessing.”³³ It also seems that God’s promise to bring a curse for “despising” is fulfilled later in the story (16:9).

THE RESULTS OF SELF-MADE SOLUTIONS (vv. 5–6)

“And Sarai said to Abram, ‘May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!’ But Abram said to Sarai, ‘Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please.’ Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her” (vv. 5–6).

As she had done before (v. 2) Sarai again spoke about God and again her tone was accusatory, though this time she spoke to Abram. “Like Eve, Sarah now shifts the blame, and like Adam, Abram shrugs

³⁰ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 154.

³¹ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 68.

³² Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 8.

³³ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 321.

off a responsibility.”³⁴

Then again Abram weakly acquiesced to Sarai’s harsh reaction. He called Hagar Sarah’s “servant” (אֲמָתָא), as she was first referred to in verse 1, rather than his “wife,” as she had become (v. 3). Alter contrasted her “wife” status with her abusive treatment by Sarah. “The terminological equation of the two women is surely intended, and sets up an ironic backdrop for Sarai’s abuse of Hagar.”³⁵ Waltke observes that Sarai here reflected the truth of Agur’s proverb in Proverbs 30:21–23—or perhaps this incident was the occasion that gave rise to the proverb—“Under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up: . . . a maidservant [אֲמָתָא] who displaces her mistress [אֲרִיסָתָא].”³⁶ The word for maidservant is used of Hagar in Genesis 16:1–2, 6, and the word for mistress is used of Sarai in verses 4, 8–9.

When Sarai “dealt harshly” with or “mistreated” (אָנְפָּלָה) her, Hagar fled (v. 6). God had already told Abram that Israel would experience “affliction” in Egypt. “Then the LORD said to Abram, ‘Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted [אָנְפָּלָה] for four hundred years’” (15:13). Also, as Friedman points out, “Sarai’s treatment of the Egyptian Hagar foreshadows (or is reversed in, or governs) Israel’s experience in Egypt. These exact words recur there: Egypt ‘degraded’ them (Exodus 1:12), and they fled (14:5). And note that, like Israel, Hagar fled to the *wilderness* (v. 7).”³⁷ Thus Abram and Sarai’s experience foreshadowed Israel’s experiences in the wilderness. Israel was thus reminded that as Abram and Sarai had failed, so had Israel failed in the wilderness. And as Abram should have done better (as in fact he later did), so the Israelites should learn the lesson and walk in faith and obedience. But Moses drew yet another ironic comparison: here an Egyptian was mistreated by the people of God!³⁸ Perhaps Moses was reminding Israel to temper their attitude toward the Egyptians who had so recently and so brutally mistreated them. And He may have also been reminding them that all humans are liable to sin and to brutal treatment of others, particularly after failure to walk in faith and obedience and when plans backfire.

Kidner observes the irony that Sarai’s talk of justice (v. 5) soon

³⁴ Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 252.

³⁵ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 68.

³⁶ Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 252.

³⁷ Richard Elliot Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah: With a New English Translation and the Hebrew Text* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001), 59 (italics his).

³⁸ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 320.

became an occasion for revenge (v. 6).³⁹ She was not the first to do this. Human schemes that depart from God's ways often backfire and produce bitterness and suffering. These not infrequently lead to revenge and violence, all in the name of "justice." "Victimized by barrenness and Hagar, Sarah now becomes the victimizer."⁴⁰

This story began with Sarai's impatience because of the seeming delay in her having a son as God had promised. It continued with homemade plans that left God out, resulting in bitterness and suffering. Israel could hardly miss the analogy to their own experience with the golden calf, recorded in Exodus 32:1. "When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, 'Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.'" Impatience with God's delays is a test for God's people in all generations.

Genesis 16:1–6 shows that Sarai and Abram sought to accomplish what they wanted without trust in God, using methods of their own devising. Because they did not wait on the Lord, the result, as seen so often in Genesis, was suffering, as well as failure to achieve the desired goal. Wenham calls this the "wreck of human relationships."⁴¹ Sarai was angry with God, angry with Abram, and angry with Hagar, and most of the discord was a result of her own doing! This well illustrates the idea later stated succinctly in Proverbs 14:12, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death."

GOD SEES AND HEARS, SO BELIEVERS SHOULD WAIT AND OBEY (16:7–16)

In this concluding section of the story the angel of the Lord taught Sarai and Abram what it was about God that they had failed to understand and that, had they understood it, would have saved them much grief and sorrow.

Here the angel of the Lord spoke four times. Whenever God or a messenger of God speaks in a biblical narrative, the message is of special importance. "The clear revelation about God that provides the message for the narrative is found in the speeches of the angel of the Lord and is summarized in the names at the end of the record."⁴²

³⁹ Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, 126.

⁴⁰ Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 253.

⁴¹ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 9.

⁴² Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 316.

Namings are also of particular importance in biblical narratives. Often, as in this chapter, namings summarize what the author was driving at in his story.

“The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur” (v. 7). Here the angel of the Lord⁴³ found Hagar in her distress and rescued her. The Lord’s initiative contrasts with Sarai’s initiative earlier. She acted on her own, because she thought God was not taking any initiative; yet here He took the initiative at the right time apart from any human endeavor. Thus those who wait on God will not be disappointed. Also God acted on behalf of Hagar who was not an heir to His promise. How much more, then, will He act, when the time is right, on behalf of those to whom He has committed Himself? Waiting on God will be rewarded when His time is right.

This encounter took place in the wilderness, near “the spring on the way to Shur.” This indicates that Hagar was on her way back to Egypt. This is one of many examples in Genesis in which Moses cast a story in such a way that it reminds the readers of other stories with which they are familiar, a technique called “recursion.” “The angel of the Lord met the distressed woman in the wilderness and rescued her at the well of water and promised her a future blessing. This theme anticipates the story of Israel’s leaving Egypt and wandering in the wilderness, for many of these motifs appear throughout those narratives (Egypt, slaves, oppression, fleeing to the wilderness, the angel of the Lord, and water).”⁴⁴ God rescued both Hagar and Israel because that is the kind of God He is. Waiting on Him is therefore always the right thing to do. God never forgets His promises.

Duguid also points out that this is part of “a continual undercurrent in the story of Abram: the conflict between the attractions of Egypt and the apparent barrenness of the Promised Land,”⁴⁵ a theme also evident, for example, in 12:10–20, when Abram went to Egypt because of a famine. Difficulties challenge believers to wait on God to fulfill His promises rather than turning to another source that offers to supply their needs immediately. This undercurrent was particularly relevant to the original audience, since “the book was written at the time of the Exodus, for people who were tempted to return to Egypt.”⁴⁶ The temptation to look to other sources of supply is of abid-

⁴³ On “the angel of the Lord” see Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis*, 2:17–21; and Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary*, 242–44.

⁴⁴ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 316.

⁴⁵ Duguid, *Living in the Gap between Promise and Reality*, 68.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

ing relevance to the people of God. This is seen, for example, in the apostle John’s warning not to love the world (1 John 2:15–17).

“And he said ‘Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?’ She said, ‘I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai.’ The angel of the LORD said to her, ‘Return to your mistress and submit to her’” (vv. 8–9).

“As a consequence of her despising Sarah, Hagar is forced into the ‘wilderness’ where she must stay until she submitted herself to Sarah. It is only in association with her return to Sarah and her submission to her that the Lord offered her a blessing: ‘I will greatly increase your seed so that they cannot be counted’ (Ge[n.] 16:10). . . . Hagar’s actions are exemplary of the nations who will find either blessing or curse in their relationship with the family of Abraham.”⁴⁷ Also significant is the fact that Hagar was forced into the wilderness for having “despised” Sarai. This is in keeping with God’s words in 12:3, where God said (literally), “I will bless those who bless you and those who despise you I will curse.”⁴⁸ As noted earlier, לָקַח, translated “despise,” is used to describe Hagar’s attitude toward Sarai in 16:4–5. Here too Hagar’s fate is exemplary: God’s discipline will fall on all who despise Abram’s family.

While many men in the Scriptures were promised descendants, “Hagar is the only woman in Genesis who is honored with such a revelation.”⁴⁹ And Waltke observes, “This is the only known instance in the ancient Near Eastern literature where the deity addresses a woman by name.”⁵⁰ But why did God defer to Hagar in this way? As Ross comments, “The point should not be missed: God did not exclusively commit himself to Abram; he delivered people who stood outside the family as well.”⁵¹ God’s concern for all people is evident, along with His requirement that to find His blessing there must be submission to the family of God and to the covenant God made with them.⁵² Only by this means can God’s full blessing be experienced.

“The angel of the LORD also said to her, ‘I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.’ And the angel of the LORD said to her, ‘Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a

⁴⁷ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 154.

⁴⁸ Duguid, *Living in the Gap between Promise and Reality*, 68.

⁴⁹ Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17*, 453.

⁵⁰ Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 254.

⁵¹ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 323.

⁵² Brueggemann states, “The very child who discloses the *passion* of God for the outsider is no small *threat* to the insider” (*Genesis*, 153, italics his).

son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has listened to [or, 'heard'] your affliction. He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen' " (vv. 10–12).

God's promise to Hagar in verse 10 recalls His promise to Abram in Genesis 12. It seems that the promise of God is so inviolable, that because Ishmael is the son of Abram he must receive a blessing, even though he is not the son God intended when He made the promise. Since God's promises are this secure, believers do well to wait for God to fulfill them.

The angel of the Lord told Hagar to name her son Ishmael, because God had heard her affliction. The name Ishmael means "God hears." Ross explains the significance of such namings. "Popular etymologies of names are often used to capture and retain the significance of narratives (cf. the explanation of Reuben's name, 'the Lord has looked on my affliction,' and of Simeon's, 'the Lord has heard my cry' [29:32–33]). They are rhetorical devices that draw from the experience in the account the explanation for the name. Accordingly, the name becomes an aid for remembering the events and their significance. The name Ishmael would thus forever recall how the Lord responded to the cry of Hagar in the wilderness."⁵³

The rest of the promise in 16:12 differs significantly from God's promise to Abram in 12:2–3. Ishmael and his descendants would not be a blessing to the world or to Israel.⁵⁴ Speiser explains that the clause "he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen" communicates "in defiance/disregard of" others.⁵⁵ Failure to wait on God leads to regret.

"So she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, 'You are a God of seeing,' for she said, 'Truly here I have seen him who looks after me.' Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered. And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called

⁵³ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 321. Scholars sometimes stumble over such etymologies, recognizing the lack of a perfect "fit" between the name and the explanation. For example Alter refers to Hagar's explanation in verse 13b for calling God "El-Roi," or "the God of seeing," in verse 13a "a somewhat garbled etiological tale to account for the place-name Beer-lahai-roi" (*Genesis*, 71). Ross calls them "popular" etymologies to convey that they were often intended only to draw analogies and provide aids for remembering experiences, not to be grammatically precise dictionary explanations (*Creation and Blessing*, 321).

⁵⁴ Similarly Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, 127. "In the last phrase of verse 12 there is a *double entendre* characteristic of such oracles of destiny . . . for it can have equally a local and a hostile sense (lit. 'to, or against, the face of'), and both were to be true of these cousins of Israel, from whom the Arabs of today claim descent. The saying is echoed at 25:18" (*ibid.*).

⁵⁵ Speiser, *Genesis: A Translation and Commentary on Genesis*, 118. On the other hand the clause could read, "he will live to the east of his brothers" (see the NIV note).

the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram” (vv. 13–16).

Beer-lahai-roi, which means “well of the living One who sees me,” incorporates a major lesson in the passage. God *sees* His people, that is, He knows what His people experience and thus will not be lax in coming to their aid. This, combined with the name for God in verse 13 (“You are a God of seeing”), would serve as a powerful reminder of God’s character and as counsel to all believers to wait for Him since He sees His people and will aid them when the time is right.

The angel of the Lord told Hagar to name the boy Ishmael (v. 11); yet it was Abram who gave him his name (v. 15). This teaches at least four things.

First, Abram responded in faith. He obeyed the command of the Lord from the angel and named the boy Ishmael. After the failure of the scheme reported in the first part of the story, Abram returned to living by faith.

Second, Abram apparently understood the lesson he was supposed to learn. The name Ishmael had a deeper meaning for Abram than it did for Hagar. For Hagar it reminded her that God heard her in the wilderness. But for Abram it reminded him of the lesson he was to learn from this experience, namely, that God hears the affliction of His people. Every time Abram called the boy’s name, he would be reminded of the events in this story and that God hears His people; and he would be encouraged to trust God when he was in distress. There is a strong hint that Abram learned the lesson in that his son Isaac, when confronted with the same situation of a barren wife, responded as Abram should have responded: with prayer (25:21). Apparently Isaac learned this lesson from his father.

Third, an interesting contrast is presented. The name Ishmael is a form of the word “to hear,” and this same Hebrew word appears earlier in the story in verse 2, which says that Abram “listened to [‘heard’]” the voice of his wife Sarai. At the beginning Abram heard the voice of his wife instead of the voice of God, but at the end Abram understood that God hears His people. Abram came to recognize that he should hear the voice of the Lord and wait on Him instead of “hearing” the voice of others who do not trust Him.

Fourth, Sarai’s plan to be “built up” through Hagar failed. “The OT has instances of the mother naming the child (4:1, 25; 29:32, 33, 34, 35; 30:18, 20, 24). . . . But Sarai does not name the child Hagar bears to Abram. The implication of this is that Sarai’s original intention . . . will not be realized. . . . Clearly Hagar bore Abram (not Abram and Sarai) a son (v. 15a). Abram named the son Hagar bore him (not them) Ishmael (v. 15b). Hagar bore Ishmael for Abram (not for the

childless couple) (v. 16).”⁵⁶

That Hagar returned to Abram and Sarai’s household as she was told to do (since she reported her conversation with the angel to Abram so that he could name the boy), has one other ironic result. Sarai had complained that she was humiliated by Hagar. Yet it was through Hagar that Sarai and Abram were taught that God hears His people when they feel abandoned. Hagar’s son Ishmael was a constant reminder of this truth, and thus he was an instrument in the hand of God to remind Sarai of where she had failed. “How Sarai must have been humbled every time she heard that boy’s name—Ishmael, God hears.”⁵⁷ God sometimes gives His people reminders to encourage them to wait humbly on Him.

SUMMARY

The lesson of Genesis 16 is that God’s way is always the best way. Believers should wait on Him! The story shows the frustration God’s people feel when they must wait, how waiting tempts them to run ahead of God by resolving their problems in ways that do not reflect trust in God, and that those self-made “solutions” tend to lead to bitterness and suffering. The story also shows that God acts to fulfill His promises when the right time has come. By relating this idea through a narrative in the lives of Abram and Sarai, Moses has helped readers feel the anguish generated by waiting, and he has let them experience the subtle and persuasive influence of a trusted companion who urges running ahead of God. God allows believers to taste the bitter surprise, shock, and pain that come when self-reliance wounds and alienates those around them. And the narrative confronts readers with a dazzling display of the rock-solid dependability of God.

Believers are still tempted to circumvent waiting and get what they want by means that do not reflect trust in God. The anxiety generated by waiting can tempt believers to avoid waiting by running ahead of God, but this passage teaches that running ahead of God leads to painful consequences.

The psalmist voiced the same conviction Abram learned here when he wrote, “Out of the depths I have cried to You, O LORD . . . I wait for the LORD, my soul does wait, and in His word do I hope” (Ps. 130:1, 5, NASB). David similarly exhorted God’s people this way. “Wait for the LORD and keep His way, and He will exalt you to inherit the land” (Ps. 37:34, NASB). Isaiah beautifully expressed the prospect for

⁵⁶ Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17*, 458.

⁵⁷ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 324.

those who comply. “Those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary” (Isa. 40:31, NASB).