

St. Matthew A.M.E. Church
Bible Study
Monday, February 9, 2008
Genesis 16:1-6 and 21:8-21

Have any of you ever have heard anybody say, “Aunt Hagar’s children?” How many know what it refers to?

Hagar according to Biblical tradition was an Egyptian slave who served as a surrogate parent for Abraham’s son. His wife Sarah could not provide for him a male heir. She offered her slave Hagar to Abraham to conceive a male heir. Subsequently Sarah miraculously conceives and gives birth to a son, Isaac. According to the Biblical traditions Hagar becomes disrespectful and scornful of Sarah after her son is born and Sarah becomes resentful of Hagar and her son and has them banished from their presence.

Most scholars agree that Hagar is a slave in the household of Abraham and Sarah. A reading of the two biblical texts requires us to reexamine some of the basic assumptions found in these two texts. There are a host of questions that are raised about Hagar. Who is Hagar? Why must she be a slave to Abraham’s Sarah? What are the real reasons that Sarah drives Hagar and her son from Abraham’s presence? Do we have here an example of ethnic bias or is it a matter of Sarah protecting her son’s economic welfare?

First, Hagar was an Ethiopian. Western Old Testament scholars consistently have displayed the tendency to see Egypt in European dress. Few have discussed Egypt as a North African country or culture. It is through these attitudes that racism has entered Western biblical scholarship. Egyptians do not have to be black, and many Egyptians aren’t, but they are Africans. The point is not that Hagar was black, she may or may not have been, but she was African. There is no way she was European.

Second, was Hagar a slave in the sense that Israel was a slave in Egypt? The language and feeling of the text suggest that she was a free person. Why then in Western biblical scholarship is she presented as such? The culprit is the King James Version which at the time the translation came into existence had a negative view of Africa. Any person in the Bible who had an African heritage was described as a slave.

Abraham is the father of the Hebrew nation and is a very wealthy and prominent person. He is promised by Yahweh that out of him will come a great nation. (Genesis 12:2) This requires that Abraham have a male heir, however his wife is barren. This in itself would have adversely affected the esteem of her husband; for Abraham to die without a direct male heir would have according to the custom of the time, have been a tragedy. It also would have raised major questions. What would have happened to all of Abraham’s possessions and what would have happened to the “promise” made to Abraham? Sarah recognizing the serious dilemma provides a surrogate, Hagar. According to the text Hagar is an Egyptian slave under the control of Sarah.

Sarah is presented initially as the caring, concerned wife who wants only what is best for her husband. (verses 1-3) However, the relationship between Sarah and her maid, changes once the pregnancy is apparent. According to the text Hagar begins to treat Sarah with contempt and Sarah confronts Abraham about Hagar's attitude. Verses 4 to 6 show Sarah treating Hagar so harshly that she flees for her life. In Genesis 21:9-10 we see a different Sarah than we saw in Genesis 16: 1-3. Sarah now has been blessed to deliver a son of her own and is a jealous, conniving wife who does not wish to have her son play with an "inferior" child. She has her husband "put out" the surrogate mother and the child. And Abraham is presented as a man who consents readily to his wife; he is a willing pawn in her hands. He shows no remorse about the fate of the woman who is to present him with an heir apparent. And Hagar herself is a different woman. When she becomes pregnant Hagar is a bold, resolute, proud Egyptian woman who will not allow herself to be treated harshly by her mistress. But when Abraham ejects her from the household, and she and her son wander about in the wilderness of Beersheba she gives up all hope for her and her child. (Genesis 21:15-16)

Both texts present two women of different temperaments. Sarah is presented initially as a concerned, caring wife, but her attitude changes once Hagar becomes pregnant. Then she becomes the calculating, noncompassionate wife who seeks only her best interest. Hagar is a very strong, "arrogant" woman. It is her pride and willpower that allow her to flee from the household of Abraham. Then she becomes a whimpering slave woman who happens to have mothered the son of Abraham. Sarah, becomes the matriarch of Israel, the chosen people of God and Hagar the Egyptian slave, becomes the matriarch of the Arab nations. The sons of both women because of their destiny continue to play major roles and impact the world today.

A rather interesting note occurs in Genesis 25:9. There Isaac the son of Sarah and Ishmael, the son of Hagar come together one last time to bury their father Abraham. The inference is that Isaac showed no resentment at being the second son of Abraham and Ishmael showed no bitterness at having been displaced by Isaac's mother.