

Commentary Highlights

Genesis 16:1-16

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| NAC | New American Commentary |
| PTW | Preaching the Word |
| BST | The Bible Speaks Today |
| GIG | Gleanings in Genesis |
| CAL | Genesis: Calvin's Commentary |
| SOG | The Story of God Bible Commentary |
| BKW | Genesis by Bruce K Waltke |
| KUR | Genesis by Abraham Kuruvilla |
| REC | Reformed Expository Commentary |
| APR | Creation and Blessing |

****The views presented in these commentary excerpts may not reflect the general understanding of these passages as expressed by Faith Bible Church, but are presented to help us better understand the Scriptures and how various scholars have interpreted them****

Genesis 16:1-6

(KUR) – “While Gen 12-15 deals primarily with issues relating to the promise of land, Gen 16-22 concerns itself with issues of the promise seed...After the divine promise and the astronomy lesson and the ceremonies of cut animals and rituals with fiery objects, one expects that the next scene will have a seed being born to Abram. That expectation turns out to be accurate: a seed is born to Abram, but not the seed.”

(APR) – “In the arrangement of the narratives in Genesis, this chapter is parallel to Genesis 12. In that passage the Lord called Abram to go to the land of promise, but that land had a severe famine. Now with the specific promise of an heir of his own, Abram had a barren wife. Just as the famine provided a test for Abram’s faith in the promise, so did the barrenness of his wife...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.”

(BKW) – “The narrator foreshadowed the problems of Sarah’s barrenness in his introduction to the account in 11:30. The problem has now reached a crisis. The complication of seed resembles the complication of land in 12:10.”

(PTW) – “Her barrenness was deemed a tragedy in ancient culture, where it was a mark of success to have many children and a sad failure to have none. From Sarai’s perspective, the flower was fading, and time was running out. Anguished humiliation throbbed within her. Significantly, she knew that God had promised Abram that a son coming from his own body would be his heir, but it had not yet been explicitly revealed to her that she would be the mother.”

(NAC) – Immediately in the text we see a comparison between Sarai and her Egyptian slave Hagar. “Hagar is a young slave woman and fertile; Sarai is old, free, and barren.” Thus begins the cycle of barrenness that often tests the patriarch to trust in the providential provision of God.

(PTW) – “As an Egyptian, Hagar was a descendant of Ham, and not a descendant of Shem.”

(NAC) – The Hebrew term for “female servant” in verse one refers “not to a common slave but the personal servant of the “mistress” of the house.” Therefore, among the many people traveling with Abram and Sarai, Hagar was the close maid-servant of Sarai. Verse one also designates Hagar as an Egyptian, “who as a foreign-born slave had little significance in the eyes of the household.”

(NAC) – Strangely enough, Sarai “attributes her barrenness to the Lord who has “kept” her from pregnancy.” In Sarai’s mind God is refusing to open her womb, which means Sarai must conjure up another way to see that the covenant is fulfilled through Abram receiving a male heir.

(PTW) – “As best as we can tell, Sarai’s heart at this time was a mixture of both good and bad. She so wanted God’s promise to Abram to be fulfilled that she was willing to sacrifice the specialness of her intimacy with her husband. She was the monogamous wife of his youth. He was the love of her life. Sarai for love did violence to love. At the same time, there is explicit blame and implicit anger in her directive: “The Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant.” She would take care of what God had not done.”

(KUR) – Taken from Leon Kass’ commentary on Genesis, Kuruvilla quotes, “In Egypt, Abram asked Sarai to disown the marriage and accept another partner, for his sake..., and she obliged. Here, Sarai asks Abram to take another partner and in a sense disown the marriage, for her sake..., and he obliges...For whether she knows it or not, Sarai’s proposal amounts to measure-for-measure payback for the near-adulterous liaison in Egypt. Just as Abram had pushed Sarai into adultery with Pharaoh, so Sarai pushes Abram into quasi-adultery (actual polygamy) with Hagar, this time casting herself, as it were, in the role of sister.”

(BKW) – “Sarah was about sixty-five years old when Abraham left his father and homeland. Still childless a decade later, and perhaps already in menopause, Sarah draws the conclusion that the offspring the Lord has promised Abraham will not come from her body. She recognizes the Lord as Creator of life; however, she does not interpret her infertility in terms of God’s promise...Her plan to deal with the problem [herself] compares with Abraham’s in 12:11-13.”

(NAC) – In the text “Sarah never speaks to Hagar or speaks her name; Hagar is a tool to relieve Sarah’s embarrassment.”

(PTW) – “Down in Egypt, trustless Abram had given Sarai over to the Egyptian Pharaoh. Now in Canaan untrusting Sarai gave Abram over to her Egyptian servant. Abram’s fiasco in Egypt was costly indeed...If we are scandalized by Sarai’s volunteering Hagar as her surrogate, Abram’s passive, compliant conduct is even more offensive...He did not question her idea. He did not demur. Rather, as the Hebrew blandly says, “Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.””

(NAC) Moses intentionally mirrors the language of this story in Genesis 16 with the story of the Fall in Genesis 3. “Employing the language of chapter 3, vv.2-3 describe Abram’s agreement to Sarai’s plan and her presentation of the slave girl. Abram’s misguided compliance is cast in the same terms as Adam’s obedience to his wife. That Sarai “took” her and “gave” Hagar “to her husband” portrays the matriarch as another Eve.”

(BKW) – “Like Eve, Sarah now shifts the blame, and like Adam, Abraham shrugs off responsibility.”

(PTW) – “Moses wrote the account as a parallel to the fall in the garden. Sarai’s action was parallel to that of Eve. Here Abram listened to his wife, just as Adam listened to his. Here Sarai took Hagar, just as Eve took the fruit. Here Sarai gave Hagar to her husband, just as Eve gave the fruit to hers. And in both cases the man willingly and knowingly partook.

(NAC) – The practice of giving over a maidservant to your husband was a common practice in this time period. We this also occur in Gn 30:4, 7; Gn 37:2, where Rachel and Leah give over their maidservants to Jacob for wives. “Concubinage involved a husband who added secondary wives, usually for the purposes of procreation. Concubines held an inferior status to the primary wife. They are portrayed in the Bible as a servant to the husband’s primary wife but above the status of a slave...Multiple wives were wrong according to God’s will and posed a threat to the stability of a family, which is sadly illustrated by the strife in Abram’s house.”

(BKW) – “The practice of surrogate motherhood for an infertile wife through her maidservant seemed to be an acceptable social practice, as can be judged from Gen. 30:3-12, the Code of Hammurabi (ca. 1700 B.C.), a Nuzi text (ca. 1500 B.C.), and Old Assyrian marriage contract (nineteenth century B.C.), and a Neo-Assyrian text.”

(APR) – “Legal customs made it clear that a barren wife could give her maid to her husband as a wife and that a son born of that union could be the heir if the husband ever declared him to be so.”

(NAC) – As far as the text is concerned, Abram seems to only have sexual relations with Hagar once, which results in her pregnancy. The text may even be highlighting the quick pregnancy of Hagar with the seemingly “perpetual barrenness” of Sarai. “Hagar’s pregnancy failed to bring delight to Sarai, however; the Egyptian “began to despise her mistress.” Although a surrogate wife bore the master’s child, the slave woman did not

displace the status of the barren wife. Sarai reads Hagar's action as a threat against her place in the household."

(APR) – “The verb translated “despised” is critical to the account. It is the same verb used in the first recording of the promises of Abram.” This may be an indication that Hagar cursed Sarah.

(PTW) – “Logically Sarai was wrong to place all the blame on Abram. After all, it was her idea. But actually, she was right. He was the patriarch. He was the head of the house. God had spoken to him, not to her. He should never have allowed the situation. Abram was truly responsible for the “wrong” she was suffering.”

(NAC) – In verse 5, when Sarai tells Abram, “May the wrong done to me be on you!” the Hebrew word for wrong is the word *hamas* which means violence. “The term often occurs in passages pertaining to malicious liars and betrayal and even is used of physical violence.”

(NAC) – Verse 6 can be interpreted in different ways, depending on the translation you are using. The ESV translates v. 6 in this way, “Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please.” The NIV translates v.6 as such, “Your slave is in your hands,” Abram said. “Do with her whatever you think best.” Reading the ESV one might come away with the impression that Abram is giving Sarai a pass to treat Hagar badly, but the NIV seems to indicate that Abram is telling Sarai to do what is best for Hagar. As such, Mathews states, “Abram, however, does not give her to Sarai to do whatever she pleases; rather, she is to treat Hagar as she sees “best.” Abram directs his wife to treat the handmaiden in the right way.”

(APR) – “It is important to note that, when Abram said, “Your maid is in your hand,” he was returning Hagar to her status as Sarai’s servant. She was not to be on par with Sarai.”

(BKW) – Concerning the word “mistreated,” Bruce Waltke says, “This is the same Hebrew verb as in 15:13 for the Egyptian mistreatment of the Israelites. Sarah’s reaction is too severe. Victimized by barrenness and Hagar, Sarah now became the victimizer. Neither Sarah nor Hagar acquit themselves well here: the mistress is harsh and overbearing; the maidservant is unrepentant and insubordinate...Hagar’s deliverance does not lie in returning to Egypt, her native land, but in submitting to the mother of Israel and not despising her.”

(KUR) – “Sarai’s ongoing mistreatment and expulsion of her maid is inexcusable. That this is also the narrator’s opinion is evident in the use of (“afflict) to describe Sarai’s abuse of Hagar, a verb that first showed up in 15:13 and that reappears in Exodus and Deuteronomy to refer to the oppression of the Israelites by the Egyptians.”

Genesis 16:8-12

(NAC) – “Hagar as an Egyptian may have hoped to return home by way of Shur when she was met by the angel. While Sarai, who was barren, resided in a fertile land, Hagar, who was fertile, finds herself in a barren land.”

(PTW) – “The location of Shur, according to Genesis 25:18 and 1 Samuel 15:7, was near the border of Egypt...Hagar was going home to her people, the descendants of Ham, bearing her half-Shemite baby. And she was almost there.”

(NAC) – This is the first reference to the “angel of the Lord” in the Old Testament. “Traditionally, Christian interpreters ascribed to the appearance of the angel a Christophany, the preincarnate divine Son of God...It is also striking that “the angel of the Lord” may not be a technical reference for the divine Logos, but it is clear that the angel is deity in many Old Testament passages, including this Hagar incident.”

(NAC) – “The angel therefore in effect is instructing her to return to the oppressive life that a slave must endure. The motivation for her return is the great future that Abram’s patronage can provide. The promise of innumerable offspring both elevates Hagar’s place and also ensures her future provision. The language of the promise is like that made to Abram and his legitimate line of successors...By remaining submissive in Abram’s household, she and her son will someday enjoy the benefit of the patriarchal blessing. Ishmael receives a derivative blessing because of his relationship to Abram.”

(NAC) – “Taken together, each part of v.12 intensifies the picture of Ishmael as antagonist whose hostilities are indiscriminate and without restraint. Hostility toward one’s brother characterized nonelect line in Genesis, beginning with Cain; Esau, like Ishmael, is portrayed as a wild belligerent.”

(PTW) – The imagery of a donkey in the OT is “used as a figure of individualistic lifestyle untrammelled by social convention.”

(APR) – In this promise given to Hagar “the point should not be missed: God did not exclusively commit himself to Abraham; he delivered people who stood outside the family as well. The tension remained, however, because the child who reminded them of the Lord’s concern for people in distress would also be a threat to the chosen line.”

(KUR) – Hagar was asked to return to Abram’s house and to submit to Sarai’s authority...it was exactly this lesson that had skipped the minds of Abram and Sarai—they were to wait and submit, if divine blessing were to be fulfilled...She would wait for Yahweh to work out his promises and blessings for her son.”

Genesis 16:13-16

(NAC) – Hagar marvels at the grace of the One who took pity on her, although she was a person of low standing.”

(NAC) – “The site became known as Beer Lahai Roi, “the well of the Living One who sees me.” The watering place sat between Kadesh and Bered in the Negev, where Isaac periodically resided.”

(BKW) – A well is often a symbol of life and fertility.

(PTW) – “The absence of Sarai’s name is significant. Hagar’s child was intended to be Sarai’s, but three times the text emphasizes that Hagar bore a son for Abram. Moreover, Sarai did not name the child. Abram did. And he confirmed the name Ishmael, recognizing God’s intervention.”

(NAC) – “That both Hagar and Abram name the child does not present a conflict of traditions; by naming the boy Ishmael as the angel directed Hagar, Abram signals acknowledgement of the child as his own and acceptance of the Lord’s plan for Ishmael as revealed. Notices of the age of Abram, who was eighty-six at Ishmael’s birth, track chronologically the improbable reality of the promised son. Continued attention to the ebbing sands of time makes the birth of a son to the elderly couple only increasingly unlikely, magnifying the miracle of the child Isaac.”

(BKW) – “The cost of Sarah’s human engineering is to watch Hagar give birth to and raise a child for Abraham. The tension for the promised son is only heightened.”

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