

International Women's Day

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Introduction

There are many different ways to approach International Women's Day, which was first founded by socialists, in New York, in February 1909. It became a worldwide movement which was very much involved in suffrage for women and women's rights. In terms of the society of the eras in which the books of the bible were written, there is no directly comparable understanding of gender to that which we have today. Men and women were often defined by different roles and tasks in society and in the domestic setting, and the issues which women struggle with today were understood differently in Jesus' time. In 1977 the UN adopted 8th of March as International Women's Day, there is a corresponding International Men's Day on 19th November. This year, we turn to the story of Hagar as found in Genesis. It is a story about seniority and power, about patriarchy and the roles of women within that political structure, and it is also a story of childbirth, vulnerability and slavery. All issues which still resonate with many women around the world.

Text

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, and Sarai said to Abram, "You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." 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 slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl 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, "Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her. The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, "Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai." The angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her." The angel of the Lord also said to her, "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude." And the angel of the Lord said to her, "Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction. He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin." So she named the Lord who spoke to her, "You are El-roi"; for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" Therefore the well was

called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered. Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

Comment

I remember an older minister saying to me once that the story of Hagar was, to him, a story about a young woman who did not take up her responsibilities. It was, in his eyes, a story which revolved around God telling Hagar to go back to her mistress, she needed to be a servant: humble; obedient; willing to obey. Perhaps like Jesus in the hymn, 'Once in Royal David's City: And, through all His wondrous childhood, He would honor and obey, Love and watch the lowly maiden, In whose gentle arms He lay: Christian children all must be Mild, obedient, good as He. Hagar and Ishmael are as much part of God's story for humanity as Mary and her infant son. This projection of Cecil Alexander's in the first half of the nineteenth century is constructed from Victorian ideals of womanhood, parenting and childhood which were then given to Mary the mother by Alexander. In contrast, Sarai was meant to be her slave girl, and Hagar we are told acted up to her mistress. The power of pregnancy and of producing the heir in a patriarchal society upsets the power-norms of slave and owner. Ishmael we are specifically told, is a part of God's plan for Hagar, as if a man can express wildness and deliberate wilful conflict engagement, but his mother could not, she needed to return to Abraham when Ishmael would, in time, gain freedom. These folk tales in Genesis are woven together but do not entirely concur, there is a conflict in the text as to the age of Ishmael when Hagar placed him out of her sight in in Genesis 21 she appears to have been carrying the child, but in Genesis 17 we are told he is thirteen. It seems that in weaving together perhaps slightly different strands of the same tale the writers of Genesis have made a whole of disparate parts. In Sarai and Hagar we find two patterns of womanhood that do not relate well to each other. There is tension and conflict in Sarai's household and she is the manager of that household, she has authority and power. As women in the 20th century increasingly gained authority and power their legacy became as much about their choices to treat with dignity those who were weaker than them, or who worked for them, or who were in a subservient role. The advent of women in politics has meant that the moral and ethical choices of women in power, such as Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher, Angela Merkel or Aung San Suu Kyi come under the same scrutiny as those of their traditional male counterparts. One of the aims of International Women's Day was to bring about equality for women in the realm of traditional politics. For us, looking at this scripture through the lens of conflict what do we see about the choices of women of power? Can we see in the treatment of Hagar by Sarai oppression? If a woman oppresses another does that cause a conflict within those of us who might self-identify as feminists but also as Christians? The liberation of women does not necessarily include the ethical or spiritual discipline for those liberated to act with kindness to the slave or the unfree. Sarai acts within her rights, but being within her rights is not enough in this context for us to judge her actions kind or fair. Perhaps equality includes an element of equality of judgement. As much as Christ said, 'let the one who is without sin cast the first stone,' so any reader coming to this group of stories in Genesis may judge Abraham's dysfunctional family with caution. Within families we find all sorts of abuses of power, between women and men, but also between women and women, and between men and men, the wildness of Ishmael may express for us that need for revolt against the family structure which raised us, or a redefining of the self in distinction to our background – whether that be religious, social or cultural difference which sets us apart from our parents. The story of Hagar is one of liberation from the family within the love of God, for both Hagar and Ishmael it is possible to leave the family values behind, while remaining within God's plan and love. In this, the message of International Women's Day is not of a seeking of perfection of women, but rather allowing the wildness and the power to speak for itself, and judging the actions of each by Christ's injunctions to love, rather than by social restrictions or paradigms. It is possible, it seems to 'live at odds' with our families and still live within God's Kingdom and His care.

Response

Reading through the text again, what do you notice about power and gender in this story? What would you want to carry away from it as a message for International Women's Day? Is your life story reflected in these stories, of Hagar, or Abraham, of Sarah and of Ishmael? Do the places or roles in your family restrict or confine you? Or have you overcome some restriction to live as you wish to? OR Sexual slavery is still a very live issue in the world today. How do you wish to respond to this story of Hagar's rape by Abraham and her life of slavery? The organisation, 'Stop the Traffik' works with the victims of human trafficking today, and also tries to identify locations where people are being held. Is there something you could do to help women in your area? Why not have a look at their website <http://www.stophetraffik.org/uk/>? Or look up the work of Mel Wiggins at www.freedomacts.co.uk

Prayer

Dear God, why did you not make us a simple world?
Why did you not write one story for Sarai and Hagar?
A story that ties together love and life, women standing up for each other,
The success of their empowerment bringing love and life
Oh god, challenge me,
That I may not use my empowering voice to enslave another, or disown her child
Or send away the wild man with his hand against everyone and everyone against him
Do not bring to me the day that my child might lose his life In wildness, nor that I might
Forget myself in powerlessness
Nor the day when I send in any woman to sleep with a man not of her choosing,
or look by when another is forced into sex.
Whatever life you give to me, God of life-giving Let it not be that of Sarai Nor that
Hagar
Embolden me, to live as best as I can as who I am,
Amen