

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: The Promise to Hagar: Some Notes Genesis 16 & 21;1-21 Galatians 4: 21-31.

This is a really useful Bible reading exercise: illustrating both the problems and the possibilities. On the negative side, you have to sympathise with the open-minded cynic who comes to these two sections cold. That cynic will also glance at the sections between 16 and 21, and note that the elderly Sara is fancied by a foreign ruler, and that the virtuous Abraham saves his own skin by passing his wife off as just his sister. Reading 16 and 21, the cynic will reflect that: it is hardly surprising that Sara had lost hope of being a mother, and that Abraham had lost hope of becoming a dad by that route; Hagar seems to be treated as a play thing both by the elderly couple and by God; the customs of the time are as unholy as you can get; there are clearly two different stories run together, since Hagar trots off into the wilderness carrying a 17 year old young man! He or she is also going to emerge with some confusion as to when an Angel is talking and when God is talking.

Turning to the positives: First some of the technical but significant aspects. The Bible writers loved names and the meanings of names – sometimes getting quite contorted in working names into meanings. Hagar probably means fugitive or refugee – which is interesting in terms of the Jewish escape from Egypt (Exodus) and the tangled story of Jews going into and coming back from Egypt – from Abraham to the Holy Family. Ishmael means God hears. The complicated well name is “the well of Him who lives and who sees me”. (God saw Hagar, where others didn’t.) Sur is on the road to Egypt – Hagar was trying to go home. (One legend has it that Hagar was Pharaoh’s daughter, but that does seem rather improbable.) Note that Ishmael was circumcised by Abraham as well as Isaac: male circumcision was common practice in that part of the world, outside the Jewish covenant.

The Hammurabic law did provide for the wife to use a female slave as a substitute for having children by her husband herself; and for the resulting son (it was sons that were wanted) to be her child. That law recognised the family difficulties that could arise both from ordinary polygamy and from this special version of it. But the law does not seem to have allowed for sending the slave girl’s son away – hence Abraham’s reluctance (as well as his fondness for his teenage first son, who had been heir apparent for 14 years before Isaac was born). St Paul’s reflection in Galatians on the two “wives” and the two Sons is one of those Pauline passages which is quite heavy going, but hugely important. Paul was arguing against those who insisted that Jewish Christians had to keep the Jewish Law. Paul says that it is in Christ that it is in Christ, God’s Promise, that we find salvation; just as it was in Isaac, the fruit of God’s Promise, that Judaism was rooted.

So, what to take away? One part of this is that, however much dressed up in rather confused camouflage of Angelic Messenger, God meets and talks face to face with an Egyptian slave girl. Another is that God meets us in our deepest darkness. Yet another is that while it at times seems that God’s focus in the Chosen People (and then in due course on the Church as the new Chosen People), God has a relationship with and a purpose/role

for all people and individuals. But perhaps not the least to be gained from this study is our reaction, as that of a number of artists, to Hagar's suffering. We are on her side, and that of Ishmael (even if the latter in due course became rather anti-social – from the Jewish perspective. (As with Esau, the Book of Genesis, put together centuries after the events, is seeking to explain the hostility between related "tribes". Settled peoples never did take kindly to nomadic peoples – including the people quietly farming when the Jews moved in; and including the surviving hostility here and now to Travellers, and in Romania to "Gypsies".) It isn't being disloyal to the Bible to feel sympathy for the Bible's under-dogs. After all, it seems that God felt for Hagar and Ishmael. Indeed, God seems to have talked to Hagar more than to Sara!

