

The Promise to Hagar

As God promised, Sarah and Abraham had a child in their old age. Before Isaac, however, Abraham had a first child, Ishmael. After God promises to make a great nation of Abraham's descendants, but before God promises the child will be Sarah's child, Sarah and Abraham doubt that Sarah will give birth since she cannot conceive for many years. Sarah decides that Abraham should have a child with Hagar, Sarah's enslaved handmaid, so that the promise of Abraham's descendants will be fulfilled.

Important historical context: The law in the ancient near east stated that if wealthy, free women were childless, they could invite their husband to lay with their personal maid. If the maid then had a child, the child would be considered the wife's child. In this culture, therefore, offering Hagar to Abraham was not considered immoral, rather it was considered a normal custom.

Hagar becomes pregnant, and tensions between Sarah and Hagar arise, so Hagar flees because of the way Sarah treats her. While Hagar is running away, a messenger from God comes to her, asks her what she is doing and upon hearing that she is running away tells her to go back to Sarah. However, God also promises that Hagar shall have many descendants, that her child shall be named Ishmael and that he will have a prosperous life. Although not freeing Hagar from Sarah in the present, this promise is really important because it gives a foreign enslaved woman hope, not only for her own survival, but for the future freedom and well-being of her children and their children. Hagar goes back to Sarah and gives birth to Ishmael. Years later, Sarah gives birth to Isaac and again tensions between Sarah and Hagar arise, because Sarah does not want Isaac to have any competition as Abraham's first born son. Abraham is concerned, but God comes to him and tells him to let Hagar and Ishmael leave. Now homeless and with few supplies, Hagar finds herself in the middle of the desert without water and unable to care for Ishmael. As she despairs, God speaks to her. God asks her to have faith in the promise that she and her son will survive and thrive. God then opens Hagar's eyes and she sees a well of water that she had not seen before. Once Ishmael and Hagar have enough to drink, they can continue on. We learn that they both make a home for themselves and Ishmael becomes skilled with a bow, he gets married and has children of his own.

Note: Hagar is a significant figure for many women, because the promise Hagar receives from God is the only promise God makes to a woman in the bible. She is also important to African Americans and Indigenous folks with a history of being displaced and enslaved. In the Islamic tradition, Hagar is a very prominent figure because she is considered the foremother of the prophet Muhammad.