

I did it my way...

Genesis 16: 1 – 17: 27

Chapter 16 marks another stage in ruling out every means but miracle towards the promised birth. It is somewhat ironical that Abram – after the heights attained in the previous two chapters – should capitulate to domestic pressure... Chapter 17 includes the inauguration of the covenant of circumcision, but it is about many other important things. The practice of circumcision was widespread in the Middle East. The new feature in this chapter is its new meaning – to mark the threshold, not of manhood (as among many Arab and African peoples today), but of the covenant. It symbolised commitment to God and to his people, and a discarding of heathen ways...

Hagar and Ishmael (Genesis 16: 1 – 16)

- Paul wrote about Abraham in his letter to the Romans: “Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God...” (Romans 4 v 20). How do the events of this chapter suggest that Paul was *not* referring to this period in Abram’s life?
- Where did Abram go wrong? What was Sarai’s fault? What do you think motivated Abram to act the way he did?
- Hagar was making for her native Egypt and had possibly travelled some days before the ‘angel of the Lord’ found her near a spring in the desert (v 7). What did the angel tell Hagar to do, and why? Note that the angel was actually God himself (v 13). The name Ishmael (meaning ‘God hears’) would always recall this encounter with God. Note that ‘wild donkey’ (v 12) can also mean ‘free man’ (see Job 39 v 5-8). How would Hagar have received these words about her child?

The New Testament likens Hagar’s son (‘born in the ordinary way’) to the slavery of self effort, ever incompatible with the freedom and the fruit of the Spirit, as symbolised by Sarah’s son (‘born as the result of a promise’). See Galatians 4 v 21 – 31.

The Covenant of Circumcision (Genesis 17: 1 - 27)

- When God confirmed his covenant with Abram and his descendants, what did he promise to do (“As for me...” v 4)? What did God require on Abram’s part (“As for you...” v 9)?
- “Abram fell facedown...” v 3 – how does Abram’s attitude to God contrast with that of Adam in the Garden of Eden? Again, in v 17, “Abram fell facedown...” but then he laughed. What do you think Abraham was thinking and feeling in verses 17 and 18?

Note the solemnity and significance of the new covenant is marked by name changes: Abram (‘great father’) is to be called Abraham (‘great father of many nations’); both Sarai and Sarah mean ‘princess’ (although Sarai might possibly mean ‘my princess’, or even ‘contentious’). Notice in verse 1 that God also has a new name: “I am God Almighty” (El Shaddai)...

- Arab Muslims trace their ancestry back to Abraham via Ishmael. What did God promise he would do for the descendants of Ishmael (v 20)? What did he promise he would do for the descendants of Isaac (v 19, 21)? To what extent do you think these promises have been fulfilled today?

The conditions of the Covenant of Circumcision are set out in verses 9 – 14, and the actual event is described in verses 23 – 27. Note the striking absence of rules and regulations – to be committed to God was the important thing. The detailed moral implications would be left unwritten until Mount Sinai (some 500 years later)...