

Introduction

- Surrogacy is an arrangement, often supported by a legal agreement, whereby a woman agrees to bear a child for another person or people, who will become the child's parent(s) after birth. It was common at the time of Abram and Sarai, and again today (although now often by technical means). Here Sarai proposes to Abram that Hagar becomes the surrogate mother of his child.
 - In the Bible, the narrator (storyteller) often does not approve what characters do, but without commenting. Their practices should not necessarily be ours.
0. This is a hard chapter that I could have passed over. But let's not avoid the hard bits of the Bible. The Bible knows about chaotic families and this might help us handle them. The stories about Abram are a roller coaster. This week he comes off the rails again. In Genesis 15 we see his trust in God, but here in Genesis 16 a great lack of it. I will comment on each of the characters in turn:
1. **Abram** is a weak character in this story. He gives in to Sarai's unhelpful plan despite God's promise that they will have a child together. Worse, he allows Sarai to mistreat her slave Hagar. Surrogacy was common at that time, but why should Abram follow the majority? In this story Abram resembles Adam in listening to his wife when she is proposing something that goes against the will of God.
 2. There are few women in the Book of Genesis, but here there are two. Both are strong ones. **Sarai** is not much better than Abram – and she is in control in this situation. Abram and Sarai both think they should assist the LORD. This is not confirmed by Him. Sarai is also jealous, which is always a bad thing. Her treatment of Hagar (vs 6) is mentioned critically. Note that Sarai does not achieve her objectives: the son born to Hagar is not hers (vs.2), but that of Abram and Hagar (vs.15)! God does not accept Ishmael as heir to the great promise.
 3. **Hagar**, the slave woman, finds herself in an awkward position: she becomes the wife of Abram (at least that is how she feels) but legally she remains the slave of Sarai. Unsurprisingly, she cannot handle that situation. She is brave to flee her impossible situation and she gives an honest answer to the angel's question (vs. 8). This is contrary to Cain, who did not answer truthfully when God asked him a question. We are probably surprised that God sends Hagar back to her position as slave. In our time we would not compel a woman to return to a situation of abuse; in a situation of abuse, divorce is acceptable. But at that time a runaway slave would normally be killed and a woman on her own was extremely vulnerable anyway. Moreover, God only sends her back with the necessary guarantees and conditions in place. Which brings us to God:
 4. All three humans would be losers in this situation if God did not intervene. So all seems to end well. But did **God** act correctly? He sent Hagar back to the harsh Sarai, but with various stipulations:
 - God gave Hagar the right to name her son (vs. 11); normally fathers named their children. So God gives her an acknowledged position.
 - This implies that the son will be hers, not Sarai's. So in the end no surrogacy takes place! Abram was likely to treat Hagar well as the mother of his son.

- Hagar receives promises like those to Abram: she will have many descendants (vs. 10) who will also count as Abram's; and her son will have a great name!
- Most importantly, she is allowed to name God! She calls Him 'He sees me'. That is an enormous honour for an ordinary woman. 'To see' is 'to bless' and in saying this, Hagar resembles Mary the mother of Jesus.
God is 'the LORD who sees': the God I have seen, the God who saw me. And to see is to bless!

5. For us this story means several things:

- God sees both slave and free; the LORD particularly sees the weak!
- The Old Testament accepts and regulates slavery but shows that in practice it does not work; it is criticised from the inside out. The New Testament contains even stronger grounds to reject it.
- We also see that polygamy does not work. Again, the Old Testament tolerates it, but it never describes a single happy situation of polygamy.
- If God tells us to wait for his promise, we have to do so. Simple. He is the good and faithful God who will fulfil his promises in due course.