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# Lessons from the life of Hagar

## *Encounters at the well*

*"Now the Angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur.*

*"Then she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba (...). And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water."*

Genesis 16:7-14; 21:8-21

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## On the run from God

An unexpected encounter at a well: this is an important theme in Scripture. The well is often the place of an encounter; and that not only between people, but also between man and God Himself. Perhaps that is the most characteristic feature of this story: God is looking for man, even when he has departed from Him. Here in Genesis we already see a God of love, who seeks out and comes to the aid of a poor, lost human being. His name is El Roi, i.e. "the God Who sees", the God who is looking for people even before they seek for Him (v. 13; cf. Rom. 5:8; Eph. 2:1-10). In the New Testament we see this loving God in the form of the Son of Man, who came to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10).

The Angel of the Lord found Hagar at a spring in the desert (Gen. 16:7). He took the initiative, for He is rich in mercy (Eph. 2:4). Hagar did not seek the Lord. She was in fact fleeing from her mistress Sarai; the name Hagar also means "flight." She left the people to whom God had made His promises and to whom He had revealed Himself, the circle of those whom God had blessed. She went her own way, but in doing so she also turned her back on the God of Israel. Hagar shows here the character of the first man, Adam, who had turned his back on God. He hid himself

from the God against whom he had sinned, and his eldest son Cain later became a fugitive and a vagabond on the earth.

This has been typical of man ever since: he is on the run from God, he is hiding from the face of the Lord (Gen. 4:11-16). A separation has come between man and God, a gulf that we ourselves cannot bridge. As sinful and guilty people we are far removed from God's face and from His loving heart. This is evident in many ways, for sin takes on all kinds of shapes in people's lives.

But even a believer can flee from God. We see this, for example, in the life of Jonah, when he ran away from the face of the Lord (Jon. 1:3). Is that perhaps your situation, or my own situation? Am I fleeing from God? Am I disobeying His voice, the commandment He has given me? Am I perhaps wandering like Hagar in the wilderness of this life, the maze of this world?

## God's intervention

Exactly as was the case with Hagar, we also have to deal with a gracious God, who seeks us out in our misery. He already did that with the first man, and He also did it with Hagar. The Angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur (v. 7). Later, the location of this well was further described with the words, "Observe, it is between Kadesh and Bered" (v. 14).

Kadesh was a stopping place in the wilderness south of the land of Canaan. From Kadesh Barnea (i.e., 'holy spring'), the spies went up to see the land. Bered is an unknown place, mentioned only here. Shur was a fortified city in eastern Egypt. Hagar was on her way to Egypt, the land from which she had been taken as a slave by Abram. Egypt in Scripture is a picture of the world without God, the world from which we had to be redeemed. It is not good for us if we want to return there later. It is only God's goodness that He then seeks us out and puts an end to such an attempt to flee from Him. This can only come about "at the well", at the place where we drink from the living water of God's Word and His Spirit. There we meet the living God, the God Who sees us and Who knows all our circumstances (v. 13). Beer Lahai Roi = the well of the Living One, Who looks at me (v. 14).

Of course, Hagar had a very difficult time. We can understand that. After all, she had been humiliated by Sarai, her mistress, and therefore had fled from her (v. 6). We do not know the exact nature of her humiliation, but it must have been painful for Hagar. Sarai no doubt lectured her Egyptian slave, whom she had given a privileged place in her home (vv. 1-3). But it is clear that Hagar should not have

elevated herself above her mistress (v. 4). So a reprimand was needed. The relationships had grown lopsided and had to be corrected. The Angel of the Lord also agreed: "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand" (v. 9). Hagar had to learn the lesson she had been unwilling to learn until then. It was painful, but necessary that she go back the way she came. It was indeed the lower road of humiliation, but it was the way to blessing. This principle still applies, even to us as Christians: "Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time" (1 Pet. 5:6). It will be difficult to humble ourselves not only before God, but also before men.

## The way back

The conversation between Hagar and the Angel of the Lord, i.e., the LORD Himself – as confirmed in verse 13 – actually consisted of three parts. It contained a question, a command, and a promise of blessing.

(1) It was a searching question that the Angel asked her, "Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from, and where are you going?" (v. 8). The Angel knew who she was and He also reminded her of the position of subordination that she had left. The question was in fact very profound and also applicable to man in general. Freely translated it reads as follows: "Man, where did you come from and where are you headed?" It is worthwhile for us to think about this. What are my origins, and what is my destination? I am a creature of God, sprung from His hand and not the product of a long process of evolution. And what will be my destination? Am I on the way to heaven, or to Egypt, to destruction and ruin?

To Adam God asked the question, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9). For man had hidden himself from God. He had sinned against God and was separated from God. In fact, he was far from God and without hope for the future (cf. Eph. 2:12). To Cain, however, God asked another question, "What have you done?" (Gen. 4:10). He was the first murderer, and had taken the life of his own brother. He had not only sinned against God, but also against his neighbor. Both our sinful condition and our sinful actions keep us separated from God. The question of Genesis 16 connects to this. If I realize what my true condition is and admit that I am a sinner, then I must also reflect on my future. I must face the question of where I am actually headed. What will my end be?

(2) However, attached to this question is also a commission. That assignment reads: Repent and return! That is how we read it in this story: Return, and humble yourself (v. 9). Repentance is not as difficult as it may seem. In essence, it is a clear

command: we must turn around and go back to God. At the same time, the command is not easy, for we must bow deeply before Him and repent in dust and ashes (cf. Job 42:6). In the way of humiliation, nothing of myself remains. But in the way of repentance and rebirth, the communion with God is restored. So this is the way to true blessing, to true happiness.

(3) It was actually the same with Hagar, for a tremendous promise was coupled with the command to repent. The difficult command she received culminated in a rich blessing. Her son could only be recognized as the offspring of the patriarch through her return to her mistress. This is clear from the sequel. Indeed, Abram gave to the son that Hagar bore him after her return the name that had already been revealed to her by the Angel of the LORD: Ishmael (i.e. "God hears"). This name expressed the fact that the LORD had heard her misery. And thus her numerous offspring – for Ishmael had no fewer than twelve sons – also became indirectly the offspring of Abraham, although the line of promise would run through Isaac (vv. 10-16; cf. Gen. 17:20; 21:12-13; 25:12-18).

## Brought to the living God

This divine revelation led Hagar to call on the name of the LORD at the well Beer Lahai Roi. Calling on the name of the LORD (v. 13), is in fact an act of worship. For us as Christians, calling on God's name is our reasonable service (Rom. 12:1). It is acknowledging and expressing all that God wants to be for us, and giving Him thanks and homage.

This is what we want to do personally and together as Christians. And so we now call on Him as our Father, in Christ Jesus our Lord. We may express His greatness in our songs, prayers and thanksgivings. So the invocation of the Name is in fact the theme of our worship, as the apostle also affirms, "Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name" (Heb. 13:15). The grateful response to God's revelation to us in Christ Jesus is that we honor and glorify our God, that we praise His precious Name in our songs and prayers.

Like Hagar, we have come to know Him as the Living One, Who in marvelous grace has looked out for us. Saved from sin, we now serve the living and true God and wait for His Son from heaven (1 Thess. 1:9-10). For we have a living Lord and Savior, who has overcome death and the grave.

## Living near the well

Genesis 24 and 25 add something to this. Indeed, the well Beer Lahai Roi later became Isaac's dwelling place in the South (Gen. 24:62; 25:11). We see this spring in Isaac's life as a permanent resource, a permanent home. So it should also be with us. We do not just come accidentally to the well that God points out to us on our pilgrimage. No, we want to make our home there. That is God's intention. He wants to bless us there, just as He also blessed Isaac. That is why the psalmist says, "Blessed are those who dwell in Your house; they will still be praising You" (Ps. 84:4).

Thus the wandering pilgrim, looking for water, becomes a priest in God's house. He has then found a permanent dwelling place in the house of his God, a place of constant communion with the living God, a place of uninterrupted fellowship (Gen. 25:11). It is evident that to live, to dwell, near the Source of blessing is more than to have an occasional encounter with Him.

## Typological lessons

The story of Hagar in Genesis 21 is in several ways the counterpart of the story of Genesis 16. Both stories took place in the desert, near a well (respectively, the well of the living God, Who looks out for me; and the well of the oath). In both cases Hagar received a divine revelation regarding her son. In Genesis 16 she was with child, but in Genesis 21 her son Ishmael must have been about seventeen years old. In both stories God looked out for her. And Ishmael means, "God hears." God saw Hagar's misery, but He equally heard the voice of the lad (Gen. 16:11; 21:17). In Genesis 16, Hagar was fleeing from her mistress Sarai. That flight was premature and she had to go back. In chapter 21, her departure was final and it was in accordance with God's will. The son of the bondwoman could not inherit with Isaac, the son of promise.

There are important spiritual lessons hidden in this, as Paul shows in Galatians 4. This story illustrates important principles, including that the church has a different inheritance from the earthly people of God, from Jerusalem which now is. Judaism and Christianity are not on a par with each other, just as there was a big difference between Ishmael and Isaac. Christians are not children of the bondwoman but of the freewoman. The heavenly Jerusalem is our mother and therefore we are free from the service of the law. The dispensation of the law is quite different from the

dispensation of grace – which now reigns through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 5:21).

As Christians, we are not under the regime of the law, but under the reign of grace (Rom. 6:14-15). The conclusion must therefore be that Judaism and legalism have no place in the church of the living God. This is to be condemned and must be put away, just as the bondwoman was sent away with her son from the house of Abraham (Gal. 4:21-31). Ishmael is a picture of the natural man, who goes his way in his own strength. For he would be "a wild man" (Gen. 16:12). But sinful flesh and the Spirit cannot go together. However, the flesh and the world – the land of Egypt – do go together (cf. Gen. 21:21).

There is another important prophetic lesson to be derived from this incident. The fact that Ishmael was sent away did not mean that there was no future for him. He was indeed blessed because he was a descendant of Abraham. God's promise was, "Yet I will also make a nation of the son of the bondwoman, because he is your seed" (Gen. 21:13). There is even mention of "a great nation" (Gen. 21:18). As had been announced earlier, twelve princes came forth from Ishmael (Gen. 17:20; 25:16). It is striking that the tribes of Israel were also twelve in number. Therefore, the son of the bondwoman is sometimes a picture of Israel as the earthly people of God under the bondage of the law, Jerusalem which now is (Gal. 4:25). However, in the end time it will bear a rich blessing under the new covenant.

But the line of promise, the line of God's covenant ran through Isaac. With him the eternal God made "an everlasting covenant" (Gen. 17:19). Isaac, the son who was sacrificed and later rose again from the dead, so to speak, is a type of Christ (Heb. 11:17-19). Through Christ, the Seed of promise, we as believers from the Gentiles now belong to Abraham's posterity. We are firmly united to Christ and we are blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ. The heavenly church therefore has a unique inheritance. As children of the promise and children of the freewoman, we are heirs of God and co-heirs of Christ (Rom. 4:9-25; Gal. 3:16-29).

## Water in the wilderness

This story also contains practical lessons for our life of faith. When we call upon the Lord in the day of distress, He provides deliverance. He provided water in the wilderness, even the "spiritual drink" from the Rock that followed them (1 Cor.

10:4). We may draw strength from God's promises again and again and thus continue our journey. He knows our concerns and needs, including those of single parents – as Hagar in fact was.

After Hagar left Abraham's tent, she wandered around the wilderness of Beersheba for a while (Gen. 21:14). When we assume that Abraham was then still living in the South (the Negev), near Kadesh (Gen. 20:1), then Hagar first moved northward. Beersheba was on the southern border of Israel. Later she returned to the vicinity of Kadesh, in the wilderness of Paran (Gen. 21:21). There Ishmael went to live. This area also played an important role in the exodus (Num. 10:12; 12:16; 13:3, 26). The small food supply she had been given quickly became exhausted. When she ran out of water, she laid her son under one of the shrubs. Hagar sat down crying at a distance; she could not watch the child die.

Yet salvation was near. God was not far and He would dry her tears. There was a spring of water nearby, a well that testified to God's faithfulness to His promises. The name Beersheba (i.e. well of the oath) is probably mentioned here as a sign of hope (Gen. 21:14). It would soon become apparent that God was living up to His word. He not only saw Hagar's sufferings as a mother, but in this hopeless situation He also heard the voice of the lad ("where he is", as it says here).

Hagar did not need to be afraid. God would take care of them both. She had to get up and, together with her son, make a new beginning. Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well in the wilderness of Beersheba; she went and filled the skin with water and let the boy drink. God was with him and he grew up; he continued to live in the wilderness and became an archer. He dwelt in the wilderness of Paran and his mother took for him a wife from the land of Egypt (vv. 20-21). Thus, in this place God proved His faithfulness to Hagar and her son Ishmael. She certainly had not drawn water from the "well of the oath" in vain!

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