



Gustave Dore is famous for his black and white prints of scenes from the Bible. Like this one, most are vivid and accurate, unlike some of the renaissance artwork which depicts Bible characters wearing 15th century clothing standing amidst European architecture. But who can tell me what is wrong with this picture? Ishmael is far too young, right? He would have been fourteen years old when Isaac was born, so when Abraham sent them away, he would have been 15-16 years old, not five or six as shown here.¹ But that doesn't much change the horrific situation of Hagar and Ishmael. If you recall from last Sunday, while holding a huge celebration in honor of Isaac's being weaned, Sarah demanded that Abraham cast out "that slave woman and her son" because Ishmael had been mistreating Isaac. This is where we pick up the story in verse eleven.

¹¹ The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. ¹² But God said to him, "Do not be so distressed about the boy and your maidservant. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. ¹³ I will make the son of the maidservant into a nation also, because he is your offspring."

¹⁴ Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the desert of Beersheba.

¹⁵ When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. ¹⁶ Then she went off and sat down nearby, about a bowshot away, for she thought, "I cannot watch the boy die." And as she sat there nearby, she began to sob.

¹⁷ God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. ¹⁸ Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation."

¹⁹ Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.

²⁰ God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. ²¹ While he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt.

It's important that we clearly see Abraham's response in verse eleven—He was greatly distressed. I think the ESV has it right when it says that Abraham was “greatly displeased.” We might say that he was *utterly disgusted* that his wife would even suggest such a horrendous thing. Furthermore, he was so upset “because it concerned his son.” Before I looked at this carefully, I had assumed that the son he was distressed about was Isaac, but the writer wants us to understand that Abraham was upset about his son *Ishmael*. Hagar received protection under Abraham's family, but she wasn't quite a second wife. She had started as Sarah's maidservant and she remained as a maidservant, but Ishmael is a different story. He was every bit a son of Abraham as was Isaac, and had Isaac not been born, he would have had full rights of inheritance over Abraham's estate. Sarah was demanding that Abraham break his bond with his older son, Ishmael. This was such an evil request on the part of Sarah because listening to her demand would have turned Hagar into a single mother and Ishmael into a fatherless boy. So here we are on Mother's Day and we have before us what could be called the greatest sin against a mother recorded in Scripture. To put that into context, we must understand how often the Bible condemns mistreatment of the widow and the fatherless. Here is a brief sampling.

Deut 10:18 He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing

Psalms 68:5 A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.

Isaiah 1:16-17 Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.

Jeremiah 7:6-7 If you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow...then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever.

Lamentations 5:3 We have become orphans and fatherless, our mothers like widows.²

Ezekiel 22:7 In you they have oppressed the alien and mistreated the fatherless and the widow.

Zechariah 7:10 Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor.

Malachi 3:5 I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me,” says the LORD Almighty.

Mark 12:40 They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely.”

1 Tim. 5:16 If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need.

James 1:27 Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Moses, David, the prophets, Jesus and the apostles are all unified on this point—in a patriarchal society, the widow and the fatherless were the most vulnerable of all people and how you treated them was foundational to your understanding of who God was and how he wants us to treat others. God literally is a “A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows.” It is part of his very nature to protect “widows and orphans in their distress”, as James puts it. The sin of oppressing the widow and the fatherless was just as bad as sorcery and adultery. I realize that all of these were written after the time of Abraham, but surely Abraham would have understood what Sarah was demanding that he do was a grievous sin. It was personally displeasing to him as he would be losing his son, but more than that, Abraham knew it was displeasing to God.

Understanding the full context of Sarah’s request makes verse twelve and thirteen all the more shocking. ¹² *But God said to him, “Do not be so distressed about the boy and your maidservant. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. ¹³ I will make the son of the maidservant into a nation also, because he is your offspring.”* Here is the ethical question in this chapter. How can God command Abraham to do something that so clearly violated his own will? If Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away, he would have created a widow and an orphan. It’s tragic enough when a husband dies and the widow and orphan are left to fend for themselves, but when the husband forces them to essentially become a widow and an orphan, this was inexcusable. Furthermore, he would have surely been sending them to their own death. A mother and young son would not have survived in the desert. They would have been battling against the heat of the desert by day, the cold of night, wild animals, treacherous cliffs and rocks, as well as robbers and anyone else who might take advantage of them if they were found. Therefore, God was asking Abraham to violate his own commands to take care of the widow and the fatherless.

It would have been an ethical dilemma if God had not promised to take care of Hagar and Ishmael no less than on three different occasions. The angel of the Lord gave his assurance to Hagar in chapter sixteen. God himself gave a lengthy assurance to Abraham in chapter seventeen. *And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation (17:20).* And now for the third time in chapter twenty one, God assured Abraham that Ishmael would not only survive the desert, but would greatly prosper. Interestingly, long before Abraham’s descendants become the famous twelve tribes of Israel, God promised that Ishmael would be the ruler of twelve tribes. Abraham was told to send them away because God was going to show himself to be a father to the fatherless and defender of widows. God promised that Ishmael would become a large nation of people and God was going to provide the means to fulfill that promise.

Remember that this whole huge mess all began when Sarah gave Hagar to her husband so she could build a family through her. This was a clear example of polygamy, which can be a very confusing issue for the Bible reader. Abraham and Jacob had more than one wife. King David had eight wives and his son Solomon had 700 wives! If all of these famous men of the Bible had multiple wives, and except in the case of Solomon, they were not chastised for it, then how can we make a water tight case that polygamy is wrong?



Did you hear about the man from Australia who got married and placed the marriage announcement and picture in his local newspaper? The only problem was that this was his second wife and his first wife saw the announcement in the newspaper!³ We can laugh and smirk at such a story, but you need to realize you will certainly run into people who try to cast doubt on the truthfulness of Scripture by using the argument of polygamy. There is enough apparent ambiguity in Scripture that can trip up the average Christian.

Therefore, let me give a brief list of reasons why polygamy is wrong.

The first reason is the best of all—the Biblical standard from the second chapter of the Bible is that marriage is to be between one man and one woman. *For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh* (Gen 2:24). Jesus referred back to this verse when he taught about marriage, so we know it is the foundational word on marriage. Anything other than one man and one woman is a corruption of the Creator’s intent for marriage.

Second, we have a clear statement in Deut 17:17 regarding kings and their wives. *He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray.* This is clearly what happened to Solomon as 1 Kings 11:4 attests. *As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been.* One could argue that this is not the definitive word against polygamy because it depends on how we define “many wives.” I don’t think that having two wives would really qualify as “many wives.” Furthermore, one could argue that this restriction only applies to kings. Therefore, I would really like to have seen a defined statement against polygamy. I would feel more comfortable if there had been an eleventh commandment—*Thou shalt have only one wife.* Of course there is a commandment against adultery—taking another man’s wife, but there isn’t a single verse we can go to which condemns polygamy.

This leads to our third and final argument against polygamy. Every time polygamy is described in the Bible, it had led to all manner of evil and sin. If all we had was the story of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar we would be able to see the utter sinfulness of polygamy. Hagar and Ishmael were not completely innocent in the conflict, not by any means, but the result of this polygamous relationship was untold sin and suffering. As we will soon see, the situation with Jacob and his four wives was much worse. There was a great battle between Rachel and Leah and their two maidservants that was passed down to the twelve sons. The resulting jealousy led to Joseph being sold into slavery. It is true that God intended all of that for good, but that is never an excuse for doing evil. Should we do evil so that God can turn it into something good? Should we go on sinning so that grace may increase, as the apostle Paul said? God forbid that we should think this way. Samuel’s father had two wives and there was plenty of jealousy and hurt in that family. David’s eight wives resulted in children who did much worse than sell one another into slavery—they literally raped and murdered one another. Then of course we have the most obvious example of Solomon with his 700 wives and 300 concubines, who turned his heart from the Lord and eventually led to the dividing of the nation of Israel.

The Bible may not have one clear verse which states, *Thou shalt have only one wife*, but not every sin is specifically condemned in Scripture. Oftentimes the sin is not condemned but the consequences of the sin prove the sinfulness of the actions. The same is true with polygamy-- Every time polygamy is described in the Bible, it had led to all manner of evil and sin. When you combine this with the foundational passage in Genesis 2:24, we have solid proof that polygamy is always wrong.

But God directly intervened in this mess and promised to provide for Hagar and Ishmael. God promised Hagar in chapter sixteen, God promised Abraham in chapter seventeen and again here in chapter twenty one. Sarah wanted the two servants to be “cast out” from the family, driven like two wild beats into the desert. Abraham did listen to Sarah as the Lord commanded him, but he did not listen to Sarah in terms of her jealousy and anger. Notice how Abraham dealt with Hagar and Ishmael in verse fourteen. *Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy.* Abraham gave them food and water and instead of casting them out, the text says that he “sent them off.” His methods were much more humane and kind than Sarah had demanded.

But some food and a skin of water does not seem like sufficient provisions, does it? A skin of water the size of a sheep or goat would still only hold about three gallons of water. How long would three gallons of water last between two people in the desert? You would have thought that if Abraham had really wanted to take care of them, he would have loaded up a team of camels weighed down with a tent for shelter, two months supply of food and at least a few weeks supply of water, maybe even a small herd of goats for good measure. If Abraham were taking an unknown journey into the desert, don't you think he would have supplied himself with abundant provisions? Shouldn't the golden rule apply here—do unto others as you would have them do unto you—especially when you consider that this was a vulnerable single mother and her young son he was sending into the desert. More than that even, Abraham could have easily afforded to have parted with a small portion of his vast wealth. He could have sent them off with several servants of their own. He could have provided them with their own shepherds to care for the flocks and their own archers to find food, who could also have protected them from bandits and other evil people they might run into. Abraham would surely not have missed such a small provision to take care of his oldest son and her mother. Even a five percent share of his wealth would have in turn made them wealthy and would have assured not only their survival but their future prosperity.

Why then with all of his measureless wealth did Abraham send them off with only a day's supply of water a bit of food? The answer lies in Romans four—*[Abraham was] fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.* Paul applied this directly to Abraham's faith in chapter fifteen, but it can be applied to any instance of Abraham's faith. Three separate times God had promised that Ishmael would become a large nation of people. For Abraham, this meant that Ishmael could not die. There was absolutely no doubt in Abraham's mind that God would fulfill his promise. Ishmael could not die in the desert. He could not die from dehydration. He could not starve to death. He could not be killed by bandits. Nothing in heaven or earth could take the life of Ishmael until God's promise was fully in hand. *[Abraham was] fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.*

Do you now see why he sent them off with so little provision? He could have sent them off with great wealth and massive provisions, but by doing so he would have demonstrated his lack of faith in God's promise. If you don't read this chapter carefully, you might conclude that Abraham was a lot nicer than Sarah, but he was still stingy and cruel. But if you read it through the eyes of Abraham's great faith in the Lord, you see that a day's supply of water was more than enough. It was, in fact, an act of tremendous faith.

Here is the principle before us.

Small Resources + God's Perfect Promises = Great Faith

Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael off with extremely meager resources, but because he knew God's perfect promises, it resulted in great faith. Aren't we often tempted to think that we don't have enough, that our resources are too small to do much? Well I say, "Good!" Small resources are not a problem if we are able to see God's perfect promises at the same time.

But there was something else happening here. This was a type of foreshadowing of what would come next. Some years later God would ask Abraham to test him with his other son, Isaac. Just as Abraham knew that Ishmael could not die in the desert, so he would come to know that Isaac could not die by Abraham's knife. Do you see it? The two promises are nearly identical. God promised that Abraham's son Ishmael would have descendants too numerous to count, and therefore he could not die until this was fulfilled. Likewise, God promised that Abraham's son Isaac would have descendants too numerous to count, and therefore he could not die until this was fulfilled. Abraham had created a mess by listening to Sarah in the first place when he took Hagar as his wife. Abraham sinned. Sarah sinned. Hagar sinned. Ishmael sinned. They all sinned, but only God was faithful and Abraham was able to recognize his perfect faithfulness.

Did Hagar have the same faith as Abraham? The story would lead us to answer no. Very soon they began wandering in the desert, probably lost with no sense of direction and feelings of despair and hopelessness. It wasn't long at all until the small supply of water ran out. We are not told but we can imagine that Hagar cursed Abraham and Sarah for their lack of provision. In verse fifteen we are told that Hagar "put the boy under one of the bushes." Our English word "put" does not at all tell us what was happening. As one commentator informs us, when this Hebrew word was "used with a human being as its object the verb almost always refers to lowering a dead body into its grave."⁴ She didn't just lie him next to a tree, as is the normal way of depicting this verse. She laid him *under* the bush. She may not have had a grave in the ground dug out for him, but when she put him under the bush it was just as if she were burying him in the ground. In essence, she held a brief funeral for her son right then and there.

Small Resources + God's Perfect Promises = Great Faith

Hagar may have had small resources, but her real problem was that she didn't see God's promises, like Abraham did.

Furthermore, verse sixteen shows her desperation. The NIV is a poor translation. "I cannot watch the boy die" is not nearly as clear as the ESV—"Let me not look on the death of the child." This

very well could have been a type of prayer. Hagar knew there was a God. She had seen his angel and had been miraculously rescued by him while she was pregnant. But by now, she had given up and her last, desperate “prayer” was, “Lord, let me not look on the death of the child.” Hagar did not share the faith of Abraham. Is this why she also did not share in the same promise? Though she did not believe it right then, she had been promised to become a large nation through her son, but she would not share in the promise of righteousness through faith in the line of Abraham. She would become a nation but not *the* nation—not the nation of Israel, the nation of the promise.

So was that it for Hagar? End of story, game over? She failed to believe God’s promise and was therefore lost? In chapter sixteen the angel of the Lord found Hagar in her distress. Let me go back to chapter sixteen and remind you how the Lord responded to Hagar. *The angel of the LORD also said to her: “You are now with child and you will have a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the LORD has heard of your misery.* Does that sound familiar to you? I want you to notice the amazing similarity between this greeting and the one given to Mary two thousand years later.

Genesis 16:11

*The angel of the LORD also said to her
You are now with child
you will have a son
You shall name him Ishmael
for the LORD has heard of your misery*

Luke 1:30-31

*But the angel said to her
you will be with child
and give birth to a son
you are to give him the name Jesus
For he will save his people from their sins (Mt. 1:21)*

The greeting given to two different mothers are almost identical. Mary descended from Abraham, while Hagar became the mother of the Arab nation, 90 % of whom are Muslims today. Are the Muslims lost? On their own, they certainly are lost, but amazingly, the descendants of Hagar can still be saved through the descendant of Abraham. Remember the original blessing spoken to Abraham? *and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you* (Gen 12:3). The descendants of Hagar—the Muslims—can be saved through the descendant of Abraham—Jesus Christ, the Seed of Abraham. The same is true of Hindus Buddhists, atheists and New Agers—every tribe, nation, people and language spread over the earth. The promise given and fulfilled to Abraham did not just show that God keeps his promises. In other words, God promised a son to Abraham and now God fulfilled his promise now that Isaac was born. If that is all you get out of this message, you might carry a nice thought home with you, but you would have missed the bigger story. This story is not simply about God keeping his promises, but that **God keeps his promises to redeem his people**. Through the blessing given to Hagar, it’s as if the Lord said: “I will pour out my common grace on all people. I will give prosperity where none is deserved. I will build nations from people who do not believe in me. But only through the true Seed of Abraham will I ultimately bless all people, tribes, nations and languages. If you believe in my son, you will be saved. If not, you will perish.”

God keeps his promises to redeem his people, especially to helpless widows and orphans in their distress who have faith in Christ.

Rich Maurer
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¹ Also, for you all you people with an eye for detail, Hagar is shown carrying a water *jar* instead of a *goatskin*.

² This is how Israel felt in captivity in Babylon.

³ http://www.upi.com/Odd_News/2010/04/30/Bigamist-busted-by-newspaper-photo/UPI-93131272646291/

⁴ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18-50*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, © 1995, p. 83.