

Hajerah A.S: A Slave Girl or a Princess

*Dr. Ihsan ur Rehman Ghauri**

Sarah came to Canaan from Mesopotamia through Haran, with his husband Abraham (pbAh) when she was 65. She was still childless; she was barren. There was a severe famine in Canaan at that time. So they proceeded to Egypt. The Egyptian king Pharaoh was very much impressed by the towering personality of Abraham (pbAh) and God's miraculous intervention in favour of Sarah. Their nearest rivals were Ishmaelites and their progenitor Hagar. God was no party to their whims. He showered His blessings profoundly on Hagar, Sarah, and the descendants of both of them alike.

Abraham (pbAh) was born in the city of Ur of the Chaldees¹ which was situated in Mesopotamia² (present day Iraq). He did not originally belong to Canaan or the Arabian Peninsula. He migrated to Canaan, from Mesopotamia. His father, Terah, took him, his wife Sarai, and his nephew Lot and they went forth from 'Ur' to go into the land of Canaan; but they came unto Haran³ and dwelt there.⁴ Terah died in Haran at the age of two hundred and five.⁵ Sarai/Sarah⁶, also belonged to Mesopotamia and she accompanied Abraham (pbAh) in this journey.⁷ By this time Hagar was not there with them.

The Abraham (pbAh) family travelled from Ur to Haran and from Haran into the land of Canaan: passing through the place of Sichem, unto the plain of Moreh. 'They brought all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran;'⁸ with them. Again, Hagar was not there. Regarding the further journey the Bible states:

And he removed from thence unto a mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, *having* Bethel on the west, and Hai on the east: and there he builded an altar unto the LORD, and called upon the name of the LORD. And Abram journeyed, going on still toward the south.⁹

There was a severe famine in the land when they reached south Canaan. So they went down into Egypt to stay there.¹⁰ Now a strange incident happens:

(11) And it came to pass, when he was come near to enter into Egypt, that he said unto Sarai his wife, Behold now, I know that thou *art* a fair woman to look upon: (12) Therefore it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see thee, that they shall say,

* Assistant Professor, Dept. of Islamic Studies, University of the Punjab, LHR.

This *is* his wife: and they will kill me, but they will save thee alive.¹¹ (13) Say, I pray thee, thou *art* my sister¹²: that it may be well with me for thy sake¹³; and my soul shall live because of thee. (14) And it came to pass, that, when Abram was come into Egypt, the Egyptians beheld the woman that she *was* very fair. (15) The princes also of Pharaoh saw her, and commended her before Pharaoh: and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. (16) And he entreated [Good News, NIV, NWT, etc: 'treated'] Abram well for her sake: and he had¹⁴ [acquired¹⁵ (NIV)] sheep, and oxen, and he asses, and menservants, and maidservants, and she asses, and camels. (17) And the LORD plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai Abram's wife. (18) And Pharaoh called Abram, and said, What *is* this *that* thou hast done unto me? why didst thou not tell me that she *was* thy wife? (19) Why saidst thou, She *is* my sister? so I might have taken her to me to wife: now therefore behold thy wife, take *her*, and go thy way. (20) And Pharaoh commanded *his* men concerning him: and they sent him away, and his wife, and all that he had.¹⁶

The following points are note-worthy in this passage:

Vv 11-12 indicate that Abraham before hand knew what was to happen with Sarah. It means that he was intentionally going to act as a pimp to sell the sex of his wife for his material gains and safety. No noble person can believe that Abraham could have been so mean and coward man as to have behaved thus. Had there been some self-respect in him he would never have thought of going to Egypt where such dangers portended. After all, people were still living in Canaan in spite of the famine; rather even Lot stayed there and he did not starve.

V 13 indicates that Abraham was seducing Sarah to tell a lie for his own welfare, which is quite unbecoming of a prophet of his caliber.

V 14-16 indicate that as a result of Sarah's being taken into Pharaoh's house Abraham was rewarded lavish gifts of moveable property and souls. However, it may equally mean that he already had brought these things with him from Haran and Canaan and he did not need them or get them from the Egyptians. His later conduct with the kings of Sodom etc accords with his befitting behavior and stately status.

V 17 states that Pharaoh and his house was miraculously

plagued due to Sarah. It shows that God did not leave Sarah at the malice of Pharaoh.

Vv 18-20 show that the way in which Abraham was sent away from Egypt seems not to be graceful.

Except v 17 all seems to be interpolation in the above passage and unbecoming of this great and honorable family. Abraham (pbAh) was the progenitor of so many nations, prime patriarch and great prophet. He forsook his homeland and a highly promising career at his father's house. He suffered much trouble and accepted to be thrown in the pyre for being burnt alive. He never stumbled in the fulfillment of his cause. How is it possible that he could have been so ignoble as the above passage smears him to be. It is unconceivable of even a man of average character.

Thus far there is nothing in the contents of the Bible to mention Hagar or to indicate that she was a slave-girl. She has not been mentioned even in the lavish gifts afforded to the family by the Egyptians. Hagar is mentioned and smeared with the stigma of slavery in the Bible for the first time in Gen 16:1 which states:

Now Sarai Abram's wife bare him no children: and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name *was* Hagar. (...). I pray thee, go in unto my maid; (...). And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai. And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram¹⁷ to be his wife.¹⁸

The Soncino Chumash is an acknowledged Jewish Commentary on Pentateuch (Torah). It observes:

She was Pharaoh's daughter; when she saw the miracles which were wrought on behalf of Abraham and Sarah she said, 'I will rather be a servant in their house than mistress in my own.'¹⁹

The Stone Chumash has recorded similar observations here except that the suggestion is from Pharaoh:

Hagar was a daughter of Pharaoh. After seeing the miracles that were wrought on Sarah's behalf when she was abducted and taken to his palace, he gave Hagar to her, saying, 'better that she be a servant in their house than a princess in someone else's.' So it was that Hagar, an Egyptian princess, became Abraham's wife and bore him Ishmael (Midrash; Rashi).²⁰

Gen 16:5 asserts:

And Sarai said unto Abram, My wrong *be* upon thee: I have given my maid into thy bosom; and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes: the LORD judge between me and thee.²¹

The Soncino Chumash comments on it as below:

It thus indicates that she spoke to Hagar too, and cast an evil eye upon her unborn child and caused her to miscarry. Hence Ishmael was the son with whom she became pregnant a second time.²²

What a putrid observation against the great and pious lady Sarah for whom God wrought great miracles! The Bible says:

But Abram said unto Sarai, Behold, thy maid *is* in thy hand; do to her as it pleaseth thee. And when Sarai dealt hardly with her, she fled from her face (v 6). (...). And Abram *was* fourscore and six years old, when Hagar bare Ishmael to Abram.²³

The Soncino Chumash remarks here:

Sarai dealt hardly with her. Sarah sinned in afflicting her, and also Abraham for permitting it (N).²⁴

The conduct attributed to Sarah is not compatible with her personality. *The Stone Chumash* observes:

Rabbi Aryeh Levin noted that it is incongruous to believe that a woman as righteous as Sarah would persecute another human being out of personal pique.²⁵

The Jewish Enc. has discussed the theme in a fair detail. A brief excerpt is afforded hereunder:

According to the Midrash (Gen. R. xlv.), Hagar was the daughter of Pharaoh, who, seeing what great miracles God had done for Sarah's sake (Gen. xii. 17), said: '*It is better for Hagar to be a slave in Sarah's house than mistress in her own.*' In this sense Hagar's name is interpreted as 'reward' ('Ha-Agar' = 'this is reward'). (...) Hagar is held up as an example of the high degree of godliness prevalent in Abraham's time, for while Manoah²⁶ was afraid that he would die because he had seen an angel of God (Judges xiii. 22), Hagar was not frightened by the sight of the divine messenger (Gen. R. l.c.).²⁷

It has further recorded the following comments with reference to the Arabic literature:

According to the Midrash (Gen. R. xiv), Hagar was the

daughter of Pharaoh, who presented her to Abraham.²⁸

Enc Judaica is comparatively a new work. It also asserts that Hagar was an Egyptian princess:

Hagar was the daughter of Pharaoh. When Pharaoh saw the deeds performed on Sarah's behalf in his house, he gave Hagar to Sarah, saying 'better let my daughter be a handmaid in this house than a mistress in another's' (Gen R. 45:1). According to Philo (Abr. 251), Sarah testified about Hagar her handmaid also that she was a free woman of noble disposition, but also that she was a Hebrew in her way of life. Hagar was given to Abraham after he had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan (Gen 16:3).

Since a man having no children from his wife for ten years may not abstain any longer from the duty of propagation (Yev.6:6).²⁹

It is to be especially noted that there is no mention of Hagar in the chattels given to Abraham or Sarah by the Egyptians. It is nowhere mentioned in the Bible how Hagar became Sarah's handmaid; and where and when Sarah got or purchased her. Many great Jewish scholars and commentators of the Bible have observed that Hagar was a princess and was handed over to pay homage to the family and for getting her educated and reared up in a righteous family and a befitting atmosphere. In addition to directly saying that Hagar was a princess of Egypt, there are indirect references as well, which confirm the princely status of Hagar. The *Chumash* indicates that Hagar remained an Egyptian princess by even her demeanour:

To signify Ishmael's gross nature, the Torah describes him a son of Hagar, the Egyptian. Despite her many years in the home of Abraham and Sarah, Hagar remained an Egyptian princess, and Ishmael gravitated to her influence rather than Abraham's.³⁰

The Chumash observes that the spiritual people like to remain in communion with righteous people. That's why Pharaoh preferred the company and rearing up of his daughter with Abraham family to her remaining with him in his palace and court. It says:

Proximity to a Tzaddik has always been a goal of people who are attuned to spiritual values. As sages taught, even Pharaoh sent his daughter Hagar to be a mere maidservant in the home of Abraham and Sarah because he valued their sanctity.³¹

Right Rev Herbert Edward Ryle, Bishop of Winchester, writes in

his article on 'Hagar':

Rashi, in his commentary on 6:1, records the belief that Hagar was a daughter of Pharaoh, who, after seeing the wonders that had been done for Sarah, declared that it was better for his daughter to be a bondservant in the house of Abraham than a mistress in the palace of another.³²

In view of such strong evidence in favour of the fact that Hagar was a princess and not a slave-girl, why the Bible asserts otherwise? The fact is that she had been purposely described by the redactors of the Bible as a slave girl, as exposed below:

That Hagar appears as a slave-woman is a necessary consequence of the theory on which the Hebrew myth is based, the notion being that Ishmael was of inferior origin.³³

It means that slavery was attributed to Hagar to prove Ishmael inferior to Isaac. The Jewish scholar went so far in contempt of the Ishmaelites and their prime mother Hagar that they did not hesitate to besmirch Sarah with utmost misbehavior and ruthlessness. *The Jewish Enc* reports:

Sarah took revenge (Gen. xvi) by preventing her intercourse with Abraham, by whipping her with her slipper, and by exacting humiliating services, such as carrying her bathing-materials to the bath (l.c.); she further caused Hagar by an evil eye to miscarry, and Ishmael, therefore, was her second child.³⁴

What an ugly fabrication! It shows the unbelievable mean-spiritedness of Sarah towards Hagar and her son Ishmael; of which, even some learned Christian scholars record their reservations. It is stated:

Sarah in her anger brands her rival 'that slave woman and her son,' not even mentioning their names.³⁵

It depicts Sarah so spiteful a woman, as cannot be believed and the story based on it cannot be treated as credible one. The following excerpt shows what natural but shameful and unbelievable conclusions the scholars of the Bible draw from these verses.

The Collegeville Bible Com observes:

It is Sarah's jealousy, not Hagar's arrogance, that leads her to demand that Abraham expel the two. She fears that Isaac's future inheritance is threatened by Ishmael's presence in the home.³⁶

This is obviously unjust and cannot be expected from noble Sarah.

It renders the story unbelievable. Some heart-rending excerpts are afforded here from the *Expositor's Bible*, which pose a serious question mark to the credibility of the story:

The act of expulsion was itself unaccountably harsh. (...). There may have been some law giving Sarah absolute power over her maid; but if any law gave her power to do what was now done, it was a thoroughly barbarous one, and she was a barbarous woman who used it. It was one of those painful cases in which one poor creature, clothed with a little brief authority, stretches it to the utmost in vindictive maltreatment of another. Sarah happened to be mistress, and, instead of using her position to make those under her happy, she used it for her own convenience, for the gratification of her own spite, and to make those beneath her conscious of her power by their suffering. (...). She breathed freely when Hagar and Ishmael were fairly out of sight. A smile of satisfied malice betrayed her bitter spirit. No thought of the sufferings to which she had committed a woman who had served her well for years, who had yielded everything to her will, and who had no other natural protector but her, no glimpses of Abraham's saddened face, visited her with any relentings. It mattered not to her what came of the woman and the boy to whom she really owed a more loving and careful regard than to any except Abraham and Isaac. It is a story often repeated. One who has been a member of the household for many years is at last dismissed at the dictate of some petty pique [i.e. 'a feeling of annoyance and displeasure, esp. caused by the hurting of one's pride.' (*Longman's Dic. of Eng. Language and Culture*, 1992, p. 999)] or spite [i.e. to deliberately annoy or upset someone] as remorselessly and inhumanly as a piece of old furniture might be parted with. Some thoroughly good servant, who has made sacrifices to forward his employer's interest, is at last, through no offence of his own, found to be in his employer's way, and at once all old services are forgotten, all old ties broken, and the authority of the employer, legal but inhuman, is exercised. It is often those who can least defend themselves who are thus treated; no resistance is possible, and also, alas! the party is too weak to face the wilderness on which she is thrown out, and if any [i.e. any one] cares to follow her

history, we may find her at the last gasp under a bush. Still, both for Abraham and for Ishmael it was better this severance should take place. (...). For Ishmael himself, too, wronged as he was in the mode of his expulsion, it was yet far better that he should go. (...). All he required to call out his latent powers was to be thrown thus on his own resources. (...). But the two fugitives are soon reminded that, though expelled from Abraham's tents and protection, they are not expelled from his God. Ishmael finds it true that when father and mother forsake him, the Lord takes him up. At the very outset of his desert life he is made conscious that God is still his God, mindful of his wants, responsive to his cry of distress. (...). God still 'heard the voice of the lad, and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven.' It is this voice of God to Hagar that so speedily, and apparently once for all, lifts her out of despair to cheerful hope. It would appear as if her despair had been needless; at least from the words addressed to her, 'What aileth thee, Hagar?' (...). When Ishmael turned his back on the familiar tents, and flung his last gibe at Sarah, he was really setting out to a far richer inheritance, so far as this world goes, than ever fell to Isaac and his sons.³⁷

Of course this account of the mistreatment of a lady and the misfortunes of the other is a beautifully composed, well-worded, heart-rending piece of literature; but on the other hand, this is all unbelievable. It depicts Sarah as a cruel, jealous, short tempered, ill mannered and a mean-spirited woman; which is unbecoming to a lady for whom God had done so great miracles, and who remained extremely faithful towards her husband during all the years of his troublesome migratory journeys. It also depicts Abraham to be unjustly neglectful to his responsibilities towards his firstborn son and the mother of this son, playing in the hands of the stepmother of this boy. Thus there remains no doubt that this is unbelievable and a fabrication of some redactor. Being the noble 'life partner' (an eastern version of 'wife', as the marriage was considered as a life long bondage there) of the patriarch Abraham, Sarah must have been a generous and kind-hearted lady.

The above quotation is an equivocal testimony to the fact that Hagar was a princess. The grace and grandeur shown by Hagar can never be special to a bondslady. Jewish sources themselves bear

witness to this fact hence the stance of Muslims is substantiated very clearly.

NOTES & REFERENCES

¹ *The Bible, Gen 11:31 KJV.*

² 'Mesopotamia' is the entire country between the two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates [Dajlah and Furāt]. This is a tract nearly 700 miles long and from 20 to 250 miles broad, extending in a south easterly direction from Telek to Kurnah. The Arabian geographers term it as 'the Island' [al-Jazīrah] (Smith's BD, p. 400).

³ 'Haran': is a city on the river Balikh in Turkey on the Turkish-Syrian border. It retained its importance as a market and caravan town down in the Hellenistic period. It lay on the main route between Nineveh and the commercial cities of N Syria. The last king of Assyria, Ashur-Uballit established his capital at Haran in 612 BC after the destruction of Nineveh. Laban, the kinsman of Isaac and Jacob, lived at Haran. It is more than a thousand km NW of of Ur. Negeb lay at about the same distance to SW of Haran through Halab, Hamath, Damascus, Scechem, Bethel, Jerusalem, Hebron (J. L. McKenzie's Dic of the Bible, 337-38).

⁴ *The Bible, Gen KJV 11:31;*

Acts 7:2-4, too, states as follows:

(...). The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran, And said unto him, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, (...). Then came he out of the land of the Chaldaeans, and dwelt in Charran: and from thence, (...), he removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell.

⁵ *The Bible, Gen KJV 11:32.*

⁶ *The Bible, Gen 11:29: 'the name of Abram's wife was Sarai'.*

⁷ *The Bible, Gen 12:5 KJV.*

⁸ *The Bible, Gen 12:8-9 KJV.*

⁹ *The Bible, Gen 12:5 KJV.*

¹⁰ *The Bible, Gen 12:10 KJV. According to the Bible story, Lot family remained there and did not go to Egypt with Abraham. Like Abraham Lot had also got a lot of flocks and herds and men. Was the famine only for Abraham family and not for Lot family? This is not the true picture of the affairs. Actually it was a da'wah (missionary) expedition to explore fertile field for the purpose. Later on the Bible states that there was a divide between Lot and Abraham people due the scarcity of the grazing provisions for the flocks and herds of the two and Lot chose the fertile fields of Jordan for himself (Gen 13:5-12). This also does not seem to be a true picture. There is no scarcity of the meadows in the area. The fact is that Abraham sent Lot to the said areas for the Da'awh/missionary purposes and remained himself in Canaan for the purpose.*

¹¹ *A modern Jewish Commentary on the Pentateuch by Rabbi Nosson Scherman, The Chumash, The Stone Edn., 2007, p. 57 states:*

because the Egyptians were notorious for their immorality. (...). Ramban comments that it was a 'great sin' for him to put her in danger.

So it was unbecoming of Abraham to decide to go to Egypt when he already knew the repercussions.

¹² The Stone Chumash, 2007, p. 57 states:

Abraham concocted the claim that she was his sister. The honesty of the Patriarch makes it impossible to believe that Abraham would have told an outright lie.

It is better to believe that this is a corruption in the text of the Bible than 'to believe that Abraham would have told a lie.'

¹³ The Chumash, 2007, p. 57 remarks:

They will give me gifts (*Rashi*) [how mean a man would he have been who thinks in these terms!]. The sense of Abraham's statement was that if the nobles of Egypt were to shower him with gifts to win his "sister's" hand, the masses would be afraid to harm him, and Sarah's safety would be assured (*Gur Aryeh*).

No man on earth can ever believe that the Patriarch and Prophet Abraham could have thought so. Very obnoxious, putrid, and pungent remarks! Such like assertions of the Bible rather render its authenticity dubious.

¹⁴ The Hebrew word for this 'had is 'היה' (*hayah*, i.e. *hah-yaw*). It means: 'to exist, have, pertain' (Strong's Dic of the Words in the Heb Bible, p. 32, entry 1961). As such this word does not mean that Abraham was given these things by the Pharaoh of Egypt or his officials. It is also to be noted that he had brought a lot of moveable property with him from Haran 'that they had gathered there, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran (Gen 12:5)'. But some of the Versions or Translations of the Bible render it otherwise, which means that, in addition to his own assets, Abraham was granted gifts by the Egyptians as well.

¹⁵ The Chumash, 2007, p. 57 remarks:

In sharp contrast to his later behavior toward the king of Sodom, from whom he was entitled to monetary compensation but vehemently refused to accept anything (14:23), Abraham did accept lavish gifts from Pharaoh. In the context of Abraham's claim that Sarah was his sister and the implication that he would allow her to marry a suitable person, Abraham had no choice: Had he refused gifts, he would have aroused Pharaoh's suspicions (*Abarbanel*).

It is hard to believe that Abraham could have thought so.

¹⁶ The Bible, Gen 12:11-20 KJV.

¹⁷ The Soncino Chumash has recorded a footnote which asserts that Hagar was Abraham's wife; not a concubine:

To be his wife. Not his concubine (N [i.e. Rabbi Mosheh ben Nachman]), p. 76.

¹⁸ The Bible Gen 16:1-3 KJV.

¹⁹ The Soncino Chumash, ed. Dr a Cohen (Surrey: Hindhead, The Soncino Press, 1947), p. 75.

²⁰ Rabbi Nosson Scherman, The Chumash, The Stone Edn., 2007, p. 71.

²¹ The Bible Gen 16:5 KJV.

²² The Soncino Chumash, (1947), p. 76.

²³ The Bible Gen 16:6,16 KJV.

²⁴ The Soncino Chumash, (1947), p. 76.

²⁵ The Stone Chumash, 2007), p. 71.

²⁶ Robert Hunter explains 'Manoah' in Sunday School Teacher's B Manual (London: Cassel & Co Ltd, 1894), 468:

A Danite belonging to the village of Zorah, to whose wife an angel appeared, promising her that she should give birth to a son who should deliver Israel from Philistine oppression. The angel was afterward seen by Manoah himself, who, regarding him as Jehovah, offered him a sacrifice, in the flame of which the mysterious visitor ascended to heaven. The promise he gave was in due time fulfilled, and Manoah's wife became the mother of Samson [the Judge].

²⁷ The Jewish Enc. 6:138, s.v. 'Hagar'.

²⁸ The Jewish Enc., 6:139, s.v. 'Hagar'.

²⁹ Enc. Judaica 2nd Edition, s.v. 'Hagar', 8:206.

³⁰ The Stone Chumash, p. 96 (Commenting on Gen. 21:9-14).

³¹ The Chumash (NY: Mesorah Publ. Ltd, 2007), 157.

³² Dic. of Bible, ed James Hastings, etc (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 38 George Street, 1903), 2:278.

³³ Enc. Biblica. Ed. Rev. T.K. Cheyne. London: Watts & Co. 1899, p. 1933.

³⁴ The Jewish Enc., 6: 138.

³⁵ The New Jerome Bible Com, p. 24.

³⁶ The Collegeville Bible Com., OT, ed. Dianne Bergant, 1992, p. 60.

³⁷ The Expositor's Bible {in 25 Volumes}, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (NY: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1903), 1: 214-15, 17-19.