

Genesis 16:1-4

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Since they still had no children, Sarai convinces Abram to have a child through Hagar. A son would be a legal heir according to the customs at that time.

While waiting for their promised son to be born, Sarai comes up with a plan to accomplish God's promise. At this point, God's promise to Abram that he would have a son from his body did not require the son come from Sarai. Perhaps Sarai hoped she would get pregnant, then when time passed she concluded that Abram's heir would not be born by her. She might have been reluctant to "share" her husband, and decided it was now time to give her maid to become Abram's wife, according to the custom of the day. We are not told Sarai's motives. We are told in [1 Peter 3:5-6](#) that Sarah is an example of how women should honor their husbands. So it could be that Sarai considered this a way to honor Abram at this point.

When Abram entered Canaan originally, he was 75 years old and Sarai was 65. After Abram and Sarai had lived in Canaan for 10 years, in spite of God's promise, *Abram's wife had born him no children*. Sarai, now at age 75, was still barren. Human reason likely said Sarai would not have a child because she was beyond the childbearing years. We are told this explicitly in [Genesis 18:11-12](#), an episode that will take place roughly thirteen years later.

Sarai *had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar*. She was not a common household slave, but a personal servant to her mistress. Since she was an Egyptian, Sarai likely procured her while Abram and his household were in Egypt during the famine in Canaan ([Genesis 12:6-13:1](#)).

Sarai now proposes to Abram a means to secure a son from his loins. She first states the reality of her barrenness, saying: *Now behold, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children*. Sarai then proposes a means by which a son might be born of Abram. She asks Abram, *please go in to my maid*. It was common in that culture and time for a female servant to become a secondary wife for the purpose of bearing children. An infertile wife could provide a surrogate wife. In accordance with Mesopotamian custom, Sarai authorized her personal maid (Hagar) to have sexual intercourse with Abram hoping to have a child through her. This raised Hagar to the status of a secondary wife,

as the passage states Sarai *gave her to her husband Abram as his wife*. The custom stated that any child born of this arrangement would be considered a legal heir of the husband unless and until children should be born from the barren wife herself ([Genesis 30:1-6](#)).

Symbolically, the child was considered to be born from Sarai's own womb. This was Sarai's idea, not based on direction from God. However, God's promise to this point was just that a son would be born of Abram. So it is possible that Sarai thought of this action as a sacrificial service to Abram. There is nothing said about Sarai not believing the promise. She hatched a plan that would provide a means for God to fulfill His promise to Abram ([Genesis 13:16, 15:5](#)).

Sarai thought, *perhaps I will obtain children through her*. The custom is reflected in Sarai's statement that "I" will obtain. This underscores the custom, that a child born of a secondary wife would be a child of hers. In roughly thirteen more years, God will let her know she is going to bear the promised heir, and she will not initially consider it believable ([Genesis 17:15-17; 18:12](#)).

The word "obtain" in Hebrew is *Banah*. It means to build. Literally, this phrase is translated, "perhaps I shall be built from her." This is translated to English "obtain children" because that is how Sarai's house would be "built" according to thinking at the time. Speaking about family as "building up" is found in [Deuteronomy 25:5-10](#).

To "build up" one's brother's house means the same thing as to "bear" children by his brother's wife. Therefore, in Hebrew thought, to "be built up" by one's maid means for the maid to bear children by one's husband. So, the context indicates that Sarai wants her maid Hagar to bear children by Abram that can build up the house of Abram and Sarai.

Abram listened to the voice of Sarai and complied. Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan and was now 85 years old. Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband. Sarai gives Hagar to Abram as his wife. Hagar's status in Abram's household changed from servant to wife, definitely a higher status. A higher status may have been necessary for the child to have full rights as Abram's heir. However, this did not place her on a level as Sarai. The original design in the Bible is monogamy ([Genesis 2:24](#); [Deuteronomy 17:17](#)). However, when humans choose to live outside of God's original design, God meets humanity where it is, and in His time woos us to choose to return to His design ([Matthew 19:3-9](#)).

When she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her sight. The young slave girl found herself pregnant with the child of the most important man that she knew, something that Sarai had not been able to do. Hagar began to treat her mistress, Sarai, with disrespectful contempt. The word translated “despise” means to consider someone lightly or trivial ([2 Samuel 6:22](#)). Perhaps Hagar desired to replace Sarai as Abram’s primary wife, now that she was soon to become the mother of an heir.

Biblical Text:

¹ Now Sarai, Abram's wife had borne him no *children*, and she had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar. ² So Sarai said to Abram, “Now behold, the Lord has prevented me from bearing *children*. Please go in to my maid; perhaps I will obtain children through her.” And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. ³ After Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife. ⁴ He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her sight.