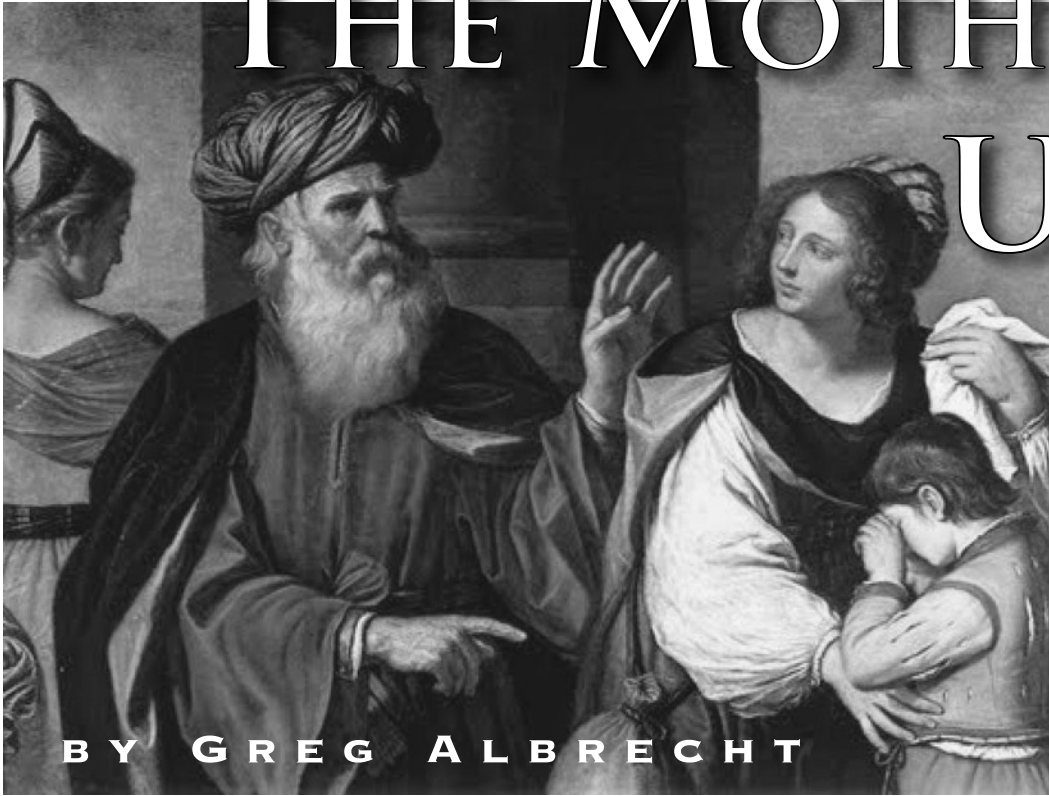


# THE MOTHER OF US ALL



BY GREG ALBRECHT

Back in 1990, Saddam Hussein, then the President of Iraq, tried to prepare his people for an invasion, an invasion that was the inevitable response to and the consequence of Hussein's prior invasion and occupation of the neighboring State of Kuwait. After the Iraqi army was evicted from Kuwait, Hussein told his people to prepare for what he called the "mother of all battles" with the United States-led coalition forces.

Though Hussein did not invent the phrase, since that time the phrase "the mother of..." has spread through the English language and is often used to define not only the origin or source of something, but also the significance or the greatest example of something.

## Two Mothers

In Galatians 4:21-31 we read the story of two mothers. The historical facts of the lesson taught by Paul are recorded in Genesis, chapters 16 and 21. Paul presents an allegory of these facts. An allegory is a symbolic interpretation of a true historical fact or event. More specifically, in the biblical sense, it is a spiritual meaning that transcends literal facts or an actual historical event.

Let's briefly set the stage and sum-

marize the facts of the historical event upon which Paul draws his Christ-centered conclusions via an allegory. In Genesis 16 we read that Abram, as he was then called, and his wife Sarai to whom God had promised to give a son, became impatient with God. Back in Genesis 12 and in Genesis 15 God had promised both of them to make a great nation from their descendants. It was a wonderful promise, except as time kept going by and the clock kept ticking and the pages of the calendar kept turning, the promise became more and more unbelievable.

At the time of the promise of a son that God made to them Abram was 75 and Sarai was 65. They had no

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children. And as time went by it didn't look like their bodies would produce one. They had given up on having children. They felt that their biological clocks had either stopped ticking or at the very least needed new batteries. Ten years passed after the initial promise of a child. Now Abram was 85 and Sarai was 75. Still no child.

So Sarai came up with what seemed like a good idea at the time, a good human resolution to the problem. She was too old to get pregnant, too old to give birth, but Abram was a young buck filled with testosterone at the age of 85. At 85 Abram was still capable of impregnating a woman, so Sarai decided that her husband Abram should impregnate Hagar, Sarai's servant. They could have a son, Sarai reasoned, by a surrogate. Abram agreed and Hagar became pregnant.

Now the plot thickens at this point. The idea, which seemed so reasonable at one time, of Abram and Sarai "helping" God out by taking things into their own hands, well, let's just say that things blew up. Things got worse, not better. Even if you've never read or heard the story, you have a pretty good idea what happens next.

## Double Trouble

Two women sharing one husband. One of them pregnant, the other one desperately wanting to be pregnant but feeling that she probably never would become pregnant. It was a recipe for disaster. Storm clouds were

looming. Sarai was continually living with the reality that Hagar, her servant was pregnant, all the while knowing that God had promised her that she would one day become a mother, and so Sarai no doubt concluded this entire mess was God's fault. Hagar was prancing around displaying her obvious pregnancy. Sarai started to despise Hagar because

## God wanted to make sure there was no way that Abraham and Sarah could claim that their aged bodies produced this child naturally.

Hagar was everything Sarai wasn't: younger, and beautifully with child.

Sarai started to mistreat Hagar so much so that the conspicuously pregnant Hagar ran away. The angel of the Lord had to rescue her and bring her back home. In due time Hagar gave birth to a son named Ishmael. Home life in Abram's tents became even more complicated when God finally did fulfill his promise.

Abraham, who had been renamed by God through all of this, was 100 years old and Sarah, his wife, was age 90 when finally Sarah gave birth to their son Isaac. Isaac was truly the child of promise.

There's no way on God's green earth for a 99-year-old man and an 89-year-old woman to become pregnant. **Isaac's birth obviously happened by God's grace.** No human effort could produce this child of promise, and it was precisely for that reason that God waited so long to give Isaac to Abraham and Sarah. God wanted to make sure there was no way that Abraham and Sarah could claim that their aged bodies produced this child naturally. It was a supernatural birth, it was a miracle of God's grace. As we'll read in Galatians, Ishmael was born the natural way while Isaac was born as a result of God's promise. But miracles do not always produce human happiness, do they?

### Two Women, Two Sons

The plot continued to thicken and the relationship between Sarah and Hagar worsened. And not only did sparks fly between Sarah and Hagar, but we read in Genesis 21 that Ishmael, the older brother of Isaac, persecuted and made fun of Isaac. The two women and the two sons could not coexist under the same roof...that is, the same tent.

Sarah demanded that Abraham get rid of what she called, as recorded in Genesis 21:10, "that slave woman." Sarah's demand, born of envy and jealousy, filled probably with a good degree of animosity, was nonetheless correct in the definition she gave to Hagar, because Hagar was a slave woman. So Abraham, keeping peace

with his wife, expelled Ishmael his son, and Ishmael's mother, "that slave woman."

### Grace in Genesis Revealed in Galatians

Before considering Paul's allegory of this factual account in Genesis, we should remember the book of Galatians is Paul's *Magna Carta* of Christian freedom. He's dealing with people who have been convinced they need to please God via legalism and religious deeds. Paul is making a devastatingly true and accurate case for grace.

*Tell me, you who want to be under the law, [who believe that you need to prove your worth to God by your obedience to the law] are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise. These things are being taken figuratively: The women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for*

**...salvation, eternal relationship with God is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. The purpose of the book of Galatians is to demonstrate and teach that all who trust in Christ and receive him by grace are free from the law.**

*Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free: she is our mother. For it is written: Be glad, barren woman, you who never bore a child; shout for joy and cry aloud, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband. Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. But what does Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son for the slave woman's son will never share in*

*the inheritance with the free woman's son." Therefore brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman but of the free woman (Galatians 4:21-31, my comment and emphasis).*

The purpose of this allegory, a spiritual interpretation of a factual historical event, is to demonstrate the glory of the new covenant in Christ.

- This allegory is about two women, Sarah and Hagar; two sons, Ishmael and Isaac; and two covenants.

- Sarah represents the covenant of grace.

- Sarah's son, Isaac, represents the children of the promise who are spiritually transformed and reborn by the power of God's grace.

- Hagar represents the covenant of human performance, the covenant of religion.

- Hagar's son, Ishmael, represents all those who attempt to build a relationship with God on the basis of their own righteousness rather than on the divinely given righteousness of Christ.

### You Want to be Under the Law?

One of the key verses in this passage is the first one: *Tell me, you who want to be under the law* [who believe that you need to prove your worth to God by your obedience to the law] *are you not aware of what the law says?* (Galatians 4:21, my com-

ment and emphasis). Taking the liberty to paraphrase Paul, it's as if he is saying, "So, you want to prove your obedience to God, you want to earn his favor, you want to please and appease him by keeping religious rules and regulations? You do, do you? Well now let's just take a look at the story of two women."

In the book of Galatians Paul keeps reiterating and restating that the central theme of salvation and eternal relationship with God is **by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone**. The purpose of the book of Galatians is to demonstrate and teach that **all who trust in Christ and receive him by grace are free from the**

law. The background of the book is that Paul is writing to a group of Christians who once fully embraced God's grace, who once fully accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ, but then, after Paul left them and continued to travel to other places, false teachers came and called God's grace into question. These false teachers insisted that God's grace, grace alone, was a

plete dilution and devaluation of God's grace. Spiritually speaking, such a teaching is toxic and deadly.

### Two Ways

In this allegory Paul is clearly, without equivocation, explaining there are two, and only two ways to approach God. There is the way of law and rules and requirements, of legal-

- Two covenants, works and grace.
- Two cities, earthly Jerusalem, the center at the time, when Paul wrote of the best religion on earth and heavenly Jerusalem.
- Two relationships, bondage and freedom.

### As the World Turns/The Days of Our Lives

The story that Paul relates, put in simple terms, reads almost like a soap opera, doesn't it? One father, two mothers, two sons. One son who was born the ordinary way, and one son born by God's intervention. One son born by human effort, the other son born to two individuals so old and so incapable of having children that this child had to be known as a miracle baby. One son born by human scheming to help God out, a child produced based on the belief that God's grace needs human help. The other son born according to God's promise. Ishmael, the son of a slave woman, born into slavery as the result of human attempts to solve problems by human efforts. Isaac, the son of a free woman born free because of God's promise, born by grace, not by works.

To make sure that his point is crystal clear, Paul says that Hagar stands for Mount Sinai. Some of his readers might well have read Paul's words and asked, "Mount Sinai? Isn't that where the Ten Commandments were given?" You might be asking the same question. And Paul says, "yes, exactly. Hagar stands for the old covenant. Hagar stands for those who

**Any mixture, any intermingling of grace with law is a complete dilution and devaluation of God's grace. Spiritually speaking, such a teaching is toxic and deadly.**

ism and performance-based religion, of works-based righteousness. You can attempt to become holy on the basis of all the things you do. On the other hand, God can make you holy, by his grace.

One is the way of

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pipe dream. These false teachers claimed that God expects (in fact he stipulates and demands) obedience to laws as requirements we must fulfill for salvation.

Let's pause a moment. Let me underline the importance of the central theme of Galatians. **No two forces or dynamics or philosophies are more absolutely opposed to one another than law and grace.** It is an absolute heresy to suggest or demand that God loves and accepts us on the basis of his grace as well as the basis of our obedience to laws. That's a religious heresy. **Any mixture, any intermingling of grace with law is a com-**

slavery, Paul says. The other is the way of freedom. In this passage Paul consistently draws the contrast to these two diametrically opposed views: that of Christ-less religion, and on the other hand of God's grace, religion-less Christianity.

Paul provides:

- Two contrasts.
- Two mothers, Sarah and Hagar.
- Two sons, Isaac and Ishmael.

try to mix the old covenant with the new covenant. Hagar stands for those who attempt to earn God's favor by keeping the Ten Commandments, and all of the other stipulations of the old covenant." Hagar, Paul says, is like the present city of Jerusalem then and now mired in slavery and sin for all of its religion. In spite of all of its deeds by which the city and system of Jerusalem attempts to make itself

Those who follow Hagar believe that religion, with its ceremonies, rituals, regulations, prescriptions and potions... can convince God to forgive us and love us...

more holy and more pleasing to God and to man, all of its religious efforts will fail!

### Our Divine Mother

Paul says Jerusalem above, heavenly Jerusalem, is free and she is our mother. Sarah represents grace, and Hagar represents law. Sarah stands for trusting in God to do for us what we can never do for ourselves. Hagar stands for trying to please and appease God through human efforts. And the sons born to them represent two ways of relating to God, on the basis of law or on the basis of grace. There is no third way. There is no other option!

Those who follow Hagar believe that religion, with its ceremonies, rituals, regulations, prescriptions and potions (and there are all kinds of them present within Christendom today) can convince God to forgive us and love us, something he wouldn't do unless and until we fulfill all of our obligations. Those who follow Sarah are children of the promise, who have rejected Christ-less religion, who have chosen to trust in God, believing that Jesus and Jesus alone can do for us what we can never do for ourselves.

Mount Sinai is a clear reference to the law given to Moses. The earthly Jerusalem is a clear reference to the religion at that time headquartered in the city of Jerusalem, a religion that depended on law-keeping as a means of salvation. Sarah stands for the gospel, for the promise of God given



to us by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Sarah stands for God's grace giving us his favor, his mercy, his forgiveness and his love freely.

**Here's the fundamental difference between Christ-less religion and authentic Christ-centered relationship with God.** One man had two sons by two mothers. The two mothers represent two ways of relating to God, two covenants; one old, one new. The two mothers represent law and grace. Law produces slavery and bondage. Grace produces freedom in Christ. There is no equivocation, there is no other option.

Once again, let's be plain and let's be bold for the glorious gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Just as Sarah realized that she and Hagar could not live in the same household, just as Ishmael, the slave child of law could not abide God's grace as exem-

Those who follow Sarah are children of the promise, who have rejected Christ-less religion, who have chosen to trust in God and believing in faith, believing that Jesus and Jesus alone can do for us what we can never do for ourselves.

plified by Isaac and thus he persecuted Isaac, we too must not be under any illusions. **We may not choose to live our lives both ways.** It will be one or the other. **Choose law or choose grace, Mount Sinai or the cross of Christ.**

Do not allow yourself to be deceived by some religiously fabricated compromise that would dilute the purity and beauty and holiness of God's grace by adding some old covenant, law-based, ritualistic, law-keeping elements. **God does not recognize any third way.** And realize this—the chief opposition and objections to God's grace do not come from those who do not claim to be Christians at all, like Buddhists or Muslims. The chief objections to God's grace come from those who call themselves Christians, but they are trapped by legalism and are in the swamps of Christ-less religion.

**No one hates God's grace like someone who is working as hard as he or she can to convince God that their efforts are holy and righteous.** It was religion that hated Jesus. We must not compromise with God's grace, my friends. We must not allow God's grace to be watered down. Each of us will either be children of faith, grace and of the promise, and thus free in Christ, or we will be slaves of law in bondage to religion. □