

Notes on Genesis 6
Children of Abraham: Christians, Jews, Muslims
(Genesis 16, 17 and 21)
Fretheim Explores Genesis,
Luther Productions, St. Paul, 2000

The Children of Abraham

- ◆ Christians, Jews, and Muslims are all children of Abraham
- ◆ Muslims call themselves children of Abraham through Ishmael, just as Christians and Jews call themselves children of Abraham through Isaac.
- ◆ 14% of Muslims are of Arab descent -- thus the majority of Muslims are *spiritual* heirs of Abraham through Ishmael -- just as Christians are *spiritual* (rather than biological) heirs of Abraham through Isaac.

Relevance of These Texts to How We Should Relate to Muslims and Others Outside the Community of Faith

- ◆ The chosen family of God is called to be a blessing to all the families of the earth
- ◆ So how should we relate to the “outsiders” -- those outside our community of faith -- who are in our midst? How can we be a blessing to them? How should we evangelize “outsiders”?
 - In particular: there is an increasing Muslim population in the U.S.A. How should we relate to them?
- ◆ These text from Genesis can help us

Why are the Stories of Hagar and Ishmael neglected?

- ◆ These texts are often neglected, skipped over in Sunday School and bible studies. Why? Could it be because:
 - Hagar and Ishmael are outsiders?
 - Hagar is a woman?
 - Hagar is a slave?
 - Hagar is black?
 - Muslims trace their ancestry to Hagar and Ishmael?

Sarah

- ◆ Sarah is not included in the call of Abraham in Chapter 12.
 - When God promised Abraham a son, God does not say Sarah will be the mother. Sarah was not part of the promise.
- ◆ Sarah interprets the fact she has not been able to have Abraham’s child as meaning God does not want her to carry Abraham’s child.

- So in Chapter 16, Sarah takes a self-sacrificing initiative and offers Abraham her slave girl Hagar to have a son
 - ❖ an accepted practice of the culture
- She not only shares Abraham sexually, but allows Hagar to become Abraham's wife.
- ◆ Only in Chapter 17:15 does God tell Sarah she will be mother of the son of promise. Ishmael is already a teenager by this time!
 - When God does tell Sarah she will become the mother of the son of promise, Abraham and Sarah are so elderly that they both laugh at the idea.
- ◆ There are conflicts between Sarah and Hagar because of Ishmael that leads twice to Hagar's banishment:
 - Chapter 16
 - Chapter 21

Hagar

- ◆ a slave
- ◆ black
- ◆ an outsider
- ◆ Egyptian
- ◆ at Sarah's beck and call
- ◆ She is not asked whether she would be willing to be Sarah's surrogate to carry Abraham's child -- Sarah just orders her to do it

The First Banishment of Hagar (Chapter 16)

- ◆ Hagar is pregnant with Abraham's son and looks with contempt on Sarah. This creates conflict. Abraham tells Sarah to do what she wants about the situation, and Sarah banishes Hagar.
- ◆ Hagar journeys towards her home in Egypt, alone, pregnant.
- ◆ The language here is that Abraham and Sarah "oppress" her; Sarah deals "harshly" with her
 - This language parallels the description in Exodus of how the Egyptians treat the Hebrews
- ◆ An "Angel of the Lord" -- God in human form -- appears to Hagar, calling her by her name (Abraham and Sarah never call Hagar by her name).
- ◆ God speaks promises to Hagar:
 - Genesis 16:10: "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude."
 - God tells Hagar she will have a son Ishmael = "God hears"
 - Note God is making promises here to an "outsider." to a person banished from the promised family, the community of faith
- ◆ Hagar gives God a new name, based upon her own experience of God: El-roi ("The God who sees me").
 - She, the outsider, is only person in the Bible who gives a new name to God

The Second Banishment of Hagar (Chapter 21)

- ◆ Conflict arises between Sarah and Hagar at the Celebration of the Weaning of Isaac
 - This was a time of rejoicing because the child has survived the very difficult first three years of life.
- ◆ Sarah worries about Isaac's inheritance (the oldest gets double inheritance) and demands Abraham choose between his sons.
- ◆ God sides with Sarah, and tells Abraham not to be distressed and to do what Sarah asks. He assures Abraham that although Isaac was the child of the covenant promise, he will also make a great nation of Ishmael, because Ishmael is also his son.
- ◆ "God chooses to work through complex situations and imperfect human beings on behalf of the divine purposes. God works with individuals on the scene; God does not perfect people before deciding to work through them. God may see Sarah's strategy, however inadequate, as the best possible way into the future for this particular moment in the life of this family." (Fretheim, in the New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 1, page 489.)
- ◆ There is a poignant scene between Abraham and Hagar in Chapter 21:14.
- ◆ Hagar again journeys towards home in Egypt, wandering in the wilderness of Beer-sheba
- ◆ On the way, Ishmael is in danger of dying from lack of water.
 - Hagar prays; God shows Hagar a well of water, and God again renews the promise to Hagar about her son, ". . . for I will make a great nation of him." (Genesis 21:18)

Women Who Can Find Their Stories in Hagar

- ◆ Quote from Phyllis Trimble, *Texts of Terror*, p. 28: "Most especially, all sorts of rejected women find their stories in her. She is the
 - faithful maid exploited,
 - the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class,
 - the surrogate mother,
 - the resident alien without legal recourse,
 - the other woman,
 - the runaway youth,
 - the religious fleeing from affliction,
 - the pregnant young woman alone,
 - the expelled wife,
 - the divorced mother with child,
 - the shopping bag lady carrying bread and water,
 - the homeless woman,
 - the indigent relying upon handouts from the power structures,
 - the welfare mother, and

- the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in service to others.”

Muslims and God’s Promises to Hagar and Ishmael

- ◆ God is not exclusively committed to Abraham and Sarah. God makes promises to Hagar and Ishmael, who are outside the community of faith.
 - God states the promises to Hagar and Ishmael five times in Chapters 16, 17 and 21.
- ◆ Can it be that the growth of the Muslim community is due to the fact that God is keeping the promises made to Hagar and Ishmael?

God is at Work Among Those Outside the Community of Faith: Implications for Mission

- ◆ God continues to be with Ishmael after he has left the family Abraham.
 - Note parallel texts: “God was with Ishmael” (Genesis 21:20). “God was with Abraham” (Genesis 21:22)
 - God is with both those in the Community of Faith and those outside the community of faith.
- ◆ In mission, we do not bring God to others: God is already there! “God is present and active among them in ways beyond our imagination.”
 - What we can do in mission is “name” the experiences of God that those outside the community of faith have already had.

References

- ◆ Video series: **Fretheim Explores Genesis**. Luther Productions. St. Paul. 2000. (Available from: <http://www.lutherproductions.com/bibleseries.htm>)
- ◆ "The Book of Genesis. Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." Terence E. Fretheim. In: **The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume I**. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994.