

INTERPRETATION
Bible Commentary
for Teaching and Preaching
James L. Mays, Series Editor
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Paul J. Achtemeier, Associate Editor

GENESIS

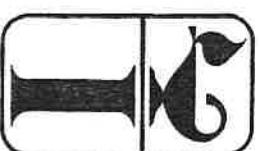
Walter Brueggemann

INTERPRETATION
A BIBLE COMMENTARY FOR TEACHING AND PREACHING

James Luther Mays, *Editor*
Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *Old Testament Editor*
Paul J. Achtemeier, *New Testament Editor*

Walter Brueggemann

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INTERPRETATION

Genesis 16:1–18:1

Faith is not easy. It calls for a persistence which is against common sense. It calls for believing in a gift from God which none of the present data can substantiate.

1. From the perspective of the faith of Abraham and Sarah, the story is oddly presented. It is structured as a Hagar story. The beginning in trouble (vv. 1–6) is matched by the resolution of the birth (vv. 15–16). Between the beginning in trouble and the ending in birth, the middle section (vv. 7–14) marks the intervention of God through the speech of an angel. Only by inference is this story concerned with Abraham and Sarah.

As in 12:17 and 14:14, verse 7 marks the intervention. This is a curious break in the story. It shows that all parties—Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael—would have left well enough alone. All parties except God! It is God who reopens the issue. The positive implication is that God is turned toward the outsider. But in terms of the vitality of the promise, the negative implication of the narrative is that Ishmael is a temptation for Abraham to trust in the fruit of his own work rather than in the promise (cf. 17:18). Thus, Ishmael is a testing which complicates the narrative. Paul has transformed Hagar-Ishmael into a sign of the law that is excessively imaginative (Gal. 4). Yet Paul has seen correctly that even in the Ishmael story itself, Hagar and Ishmael function as an alternative to the promise. They are visible evidence that in the short run, initiative can be taken from God and things will be better.

2. The middle section (vv. 7–14) is dominated by the speech of the messenger, again showing that divine speech is decisive. Thus, the angel speaks four times: *And he said . . .* (v. 8); *The angel of the LORD said to her . . .* (v. 9); *The angel of the LORD also said to her . . .* (v. 10); *And the angel of the LORD said to her . . .* (v. 11). The four speeches build until the final one in verse 11, which is a birth announcement.

a. The birth announcement presents a history alternative to Abraham-Sarah which is also blessed by God. It concludes (v. 13) with a blessing for the banished one. It is vigorous blessing, but it is not the Abrahamic blessing of the land. It is a blessing to be in another place, out of the promised land, living by his own resources, that is, not by the primal promise.

b. The middle portion concludes with an obscure etiology (vv. 13–14). Theologically, we may best follow Frank Cross (*Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 1973, p. 46) in seeing here one presentation of the High God El, whose claims are reas-

signed to Yahweh (cf. 14:19–20). Historically and linguistically, we cannot determine the meaning of the phrasing. Apparently, the name is something like “the God who sees me live.” While that holds some interpretive possibility for the character of this God who cares for the banished, it should not be pursued away from the main issue. The disclosure was not greatly valued in the tradition and is best left in its obscurity.

3. The Ishmael presence suggests two things. Seen vertically, with reference to God, it asserts that God has not exclusively committed himself to Abraham-Sarah. God’s concern is not confined to the elect line. There is passion and concern for the troubled ones who stand outside that line. Seen horizontally, from the agenda of Abraham-Sarah, Ishmael is a temptation not to trust the promise. The very child who discloses the *passion* of God for the outsider is no small *threat* to the insider.

The first narrative portion ends with nothing resolved. Sarah’s initiative (v. 2) in circumventing the promise has brought conflict (cf. Prov. 30:21–23). Now the promise is jeopardized by this alternative.

The Promise of Everlasting Covenant

Chapter 17 introduces a completely different world of language and presupposition. Whereas chapter 16 preserves the playfulness of anecdote, chapter 17 is ponderous, disciplined, and symmetrical. It is agreed that the text belongs to the P tradition and is more self-conscious in its statement than 16 (J). But the issue is still the same: the powerful claim of the promise and the equally powerful reality of being without an heir. We may suggest four elements which will be useful in exposition.

1. The *promise* to Abraham is here most fully and solemnly asserted. The promise is given in the stylized pattern of P. Throughout P, the promise does not simply crop up at incidental times. It is thematic and is carefully placed to guide the narrative (cf. 1:22, 28; 9:1, 7; 28:3; 35:11; 47:27b; 48:4; Exod. 1:7). As presented by P, the whole narrative is now subsumed under the promise. The promise (*a*) is *linked to creation*, for the language is the same (vv. 6, 20; Gen. 1:28). Thus, Abraham is the first fruit of the new creation. He is the bearer of what is intended in creation. He is indeed “the new creation” (Rom. 8:23; II Cor. 5:17; James 1:18); (*b*) is a *royal promise* (v. 6, 16, 20), undoubtedly connecting Abraham to the Davidic hopes of II Sam. 7; (*c*) is an “*eternal*” promise (vv. 7, 8, 13, 19) assuring

permanent well-being in the land; (d) concerns the *fundamental relation* of Yahweh and Abraham as belonging to each other. Thus, the promise concludes, "I will be their God" (v. 8). This is a promise more fundamental than even the land. While the action is singularly unilateral and talks only of God's commitment to Abraham, the formula clearly presumes the unspoken counter-theme, "You shall be my people." (Cf. Exod. 6:2-7 for the full formula of P. Cf. also Jer. 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 31:1, 33; Ezek. 11:20; 14:11; 34:24; 36:28; 37:23, 27.) It is evident that this formula became crucial for Israel (in P as well as in Jer. and Ezek.) precisely in the sixth century exile when normal external supports were collapsing. Undoubtedly Heb. 11:16 is a commentary on this promise: "Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God." He is not scandalized to be the God of exiles. The promise is a grand and comprehensive one. The point is not lost on Abraham. All of it depends on an heir. The large visions of God require concrete historical reality. And that is not yet given.

2. Closely related to *promise*, perhaps even an alternative version of it, is *covenant* (vv. 2-7). In the entire Abraham narrative, only 15:18 elsewhere refers to covenant. It is likely that the strange ritual of 15:9-11, 17 is an old ritual of covenant-making. But only now is the claim and reality of covenant clearly presented. It is probable that the specific patterning of covenant presented here is relatively late. Nevertheless, as the tradition now stands the covenant is the primary metaphor for understanding Israel's life with God. It is the covenant which offers to Israel the gift of hope, the reality of identity, the possibility of belonging, the certitude of vocation.

3. The central portion of the text (vv. 10-14) is concerned with *circumcision*, the sign and seal of trust in the promise and entrance into the covenant. This text permits reflection on the importance of concrete, institutionalized religious symbolism.

Interpretation must take care not to be distracted with questions about the religious history of the institution. We do not know about the origins of circumcision though they may relate either to quasi-magical practice or to a concern for hygiene. In Exod. 4:24-26 and Josh. 5:2-9, there are older accounts of the practice in Israel. While the practice is older than our text and not confined to Israel, it does have peculiar theological importance for Israel after 587 B.C., when the usual institutional supports for the community disappear. In exile,

circumcision helped give identity to the "insiders" of faith who had been declared "outsiders" by Babylon.

Most of the theological issues, as distinct from phenomenological ones, may be comprehended in four affirmations:

a. Circumcision as a liturgic act gives important concrete significance to a theological affirmation. What is said and thought must also be *done*; not only for its dramatic and educational effect, but because "belonging" is in fact accomplished in this act. The signifier has a role in the things signified. Biblical faith is never cerebral. It is always lived and acted. Belonging to this strange community and trusting in a scandalous promise requires a mark of distinctiveness. Circumcision announces that Israelites belong only to this community and only to this God.

b. Circumcision as a positive theological symbol functioned in Israel as a metaphor for serious, committed faith. Thus, the tradition speaks of the circumcision of the heart (Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4; 9:26; Ezek. 44:7). The image suggests yielding affections and will to the covenant partner (cf. Rom. 2:29).

c. Such religious symbols/acts hold enormous potential for empowerment of faith. But there is also risk, for the symbol may lose its theological intent and vitality. It then takes on a life of its own. And in its autonomy, it may become an empty form, nurturing self-deception. Or it may become an instrument of oppression and conformity. As an empty form or as a lever of conformity, it immobilizes rather than empowers. This is apparently what happened to the symbol of circumcision. No doubt that is what caused controversy in the early church (Acts 15:1-5) and evoked the strictures of Paul (Rom. 2:25; 4:12; Gal. 5:2-12; 6:12-16; Col. 3:11). In Christian exposition, it will be important not to limit this critical awareness to the sign of circumcision in which the church has no investment. It is equally important to ask about the temptation to autonomy in our own signs, symbols, and sacraments. Thus, for example, is it possible that baptism has also taken on a life of its own which has no intrinsic relation to the claims of faith?

d. The tradition of circumcision is of importance to Christians, for it illuminates the practice of baptism as an entrance into a new life, a new loyalty to a new community. It is ironic that for all the polemics in the New Testament against circumcision which is regarded as an empty form or even a barrier to

the gospel, nonetheless circumcision is utilized as a type for understanding the meaning of baptism:

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us . . . (Col. 2:11–13).

The intent in circumcision is also intended in baptism. And like circumcision, baptism has potential either as an energizing symbol for faith or a negative alternative to faith. Thus, Christians have a dialectical attitude toward the institution of circumcision. On the one hand, they are aware of its temptation to become an empty practice. On the other hand, they know no better model for understanding their own sacraments of life and faith. In handling this text, it will be important to keep this dialectic alive and visible.

4. The entire text of Gen. 17 concerns binding Abraham to God in *radical faith*. Yet by verses 17–18, Abraham completely doubts the promise, laughs a mocking laugh, and appeals to the son already in hand. Abraham, the father of faith, is here again presented as the unfaithful one, unable to trust, and willing to rely on an alternative to the promise.

a. We are now able to see the function of Ishmael as a threat to the promise. Abraham is no longer pressed to believe in an heir to be given, for he already has one, albeit in a devious way. Abraham is willing to stake his future on Ishmael. He does not fully understand the promise and its strange character. The laugh and the reference to Ishmael (vv. 17–18) are attempts to avoid the deep and unsettling claim God now makes on him.

b. The failure of Abraham at this point is comparable to the obduracy of the disciples who either do not understand or cannot believe the promise of the gospel. In Mark 8:14–21, the disciples witness the miraculous feeding of 5,000 (Mark 6:30–44) and the 4,000 (Mark 8:1–10). But as soon as the question of bread comes up, they understand nothing. They are unable to believe in the life-giving, future-creating resources present in the person of Jesus. Almost in resignation, Jesus acknowledges their lack of understanding (v. 21). The failure to understand is not a matter of intelligence but of will. They do not understand because of hard hearts (6:52).

More acutely, the disciples understand nothing of the vocation of crucifixion or the future of the resurrection. In the passion sayings of Jesus (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34) they either resist (8:32), do not understand (9:32), or quarrel about the future (10:35ff.). In every case, they miss the point that in Jesus the power of God is at work to create a newness undervived from what is old.

The parallel of the disciples' misunderstandings to the unfaithfulness of Abraham in our text is more than *formal*. There is a second *substantive* connection. The same crisis of faith is present to both. Like the disciples who fail to discern the life-giving power of the bread (1 Cor. 11:29), so Abraham fails to discern in God's promise the capacity for new life. As the disciples' inability to understand the passion sayings, so Abraham is unable to accept the discontinuity between barrenness and heir upon which the covenant is premised. The power of God will give a child of promise. But Abraham clings to a son of the flesh. Unlike Peter in his great confession, Abraham understands nothing.

c. The issue in this exchange about Ishmael is exploited in Gal. 4:24–31 by Paul. Paul has seen that the children of necessity cannot inherit. Only the children of free gifts and open promises can enter the Kingdom. The text reflects on transformation from the world of *compulsion* to that of *gifts*. Ishmael is not without his value. Indeed, in 17:20 there is a great promise to him (princes, not kings; contrast v. 6). However, the issue turns on verse 21 and the adversative "But." The primal promise is never to Ishmael. It is solely to this other son, the son given only by grace (cf. a comparable adversative in II Sam. 7:15, perhaps not unrelated in terms of theological tradition).

The Laughter of Sarah

18:1–15, in contrast to the disciplined statement of chapter 17, has more freedom and imagination. It belongs to an earlier stream of tradition with some affinities to chapter 16. It admits of suspense and excitement in the telling, so that the disclosure at its center requires narrative form and expects skillful dramatic presentation.

The primary critical question concerns the identity of the visitor. In the opening scene (vv. 2–8) as well as the departure (v. 16), it is "three men." But in verse 1 as well as the main confrontation of verses 9–15, it is "the LORD." There is no need