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# Things We Never Preach About, Part IV: The Dark Side of Abraham and Sarah

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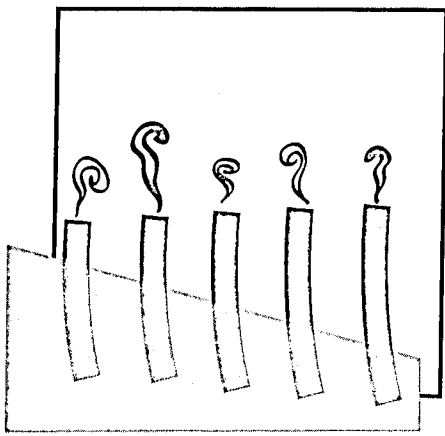
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THINGS WE NEVER PREACH ABOUT,  
PART IV: THE DARK SIDE  
OF ABRAHAM AND SARAH

*Mark A. Throntveit*

The stories of Genesis 12-50 are among the most familiar parts of the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup> When Paul needed to illustrate a particularly murky portion of his letters, more often than not he found the necessary illumination in these little slices of life. And yet, preachers often avoid these vignettes, perhaps because they appear to be little more than a conglomeration of secular legends that have little to do with faith. We rarely hear about God. Rather, we are treated to a seemingly endless procession of rape, murder, incest, strife, jealousy between brothers, unsatisfied wives squabbling over the sexual attentions of their husband, cunning deceptions, power struggles, political intrigue, neglect, seduction, greed, avarice, and lust. It sounds more like an episode of a steamy afternoon soap opera than the Bible!

Even more baffling is the way we tend to use these stories of deception, greed, and lust. Instead of offering adults-only Bible studies later in the evening on school nights for those in our congregations who might truly profit from frank discussions of these topics, we use them in our Sunday school classes for the very young, resulting in the multicolored robes and paste-on cotton beards that have adorned Lutheran refrigerators for the last half-century.

When we do use these stories, especially from the pulpit, we often try to make them relevant by presenting them as lessons in morality. In this approach, Joseph's troubles with his brothers lead into discussions about codependency and dysfunctional family systems, and Abraham, above all, is held up as a model of faithful obedience for us to emulate.

Abraham-the-Person-of-Faith is the Abraham we remember. Who could forget his leaving the security of home and family to trudge off obediently to an unknown land at God's command (12:1-9)? Who hasn't been impressed, despite the horror, at his willingness to sacrifice his own son in faithful obedience to God's decree (22:1-19)? And yet, despite Abraham's laudable willingness to give up his past at the beginning of the cycle and forfeit his future at the end, what do we do with all those stories in between?

You know the ones I mean. For example, the one where, immediately upon arrival in the promised land, without so much as a quick spin around the block to meet the neigh-

bors and estimate relative property values, Abram decides there isn't enough food in this land flowing with milk and honey to keep the two or three of them alive (12:10-20). So, rather than trusting God's promise, he and his entourage set out for that natural refuge for Hebrews in time of trouble—Egypt!

Or the one (15:1-6) where Abram asks God, how long is this going to take? Maybe my slave Eliezer could be my heir if You can't get this son thing done? Or the one where (17:16-17) he breaks out laughing at the preposterous notion of becoming the proud papa of a bouncing baby boy at one hundred years of age? Or, my favorite, the one where (12:10-20) he asks Sarai to lie and say she is his sister in order to save his own skin? He is worried that all those Egyptians, aroused by Sarai's Miss Universe potential, will kill him in order to avail themselves of her seductive, sixty-five- and later ninety-year-old charms. Indeed, he enjoyed this particular indiscretion so much that he tried it again with Abimelech, the king of Gerar (20:1-18), as did Isaac, his son, demonstrating that he, too, was a real chip off the old buffalo, so to speak (26:6-11).

It seems that Abraham, the so-called Person-of-Faith, has a dark side and models a distinct lack of faith, or at least trust, at crucial junctures in the story. Sarah doesn't fare much better with her mocking laughter at God's promise of a son (18:11-14a), nor in her suggestion that Hagar, her fertile Egyptian maid, might be a more productive alternative to the fulfillment of God's promise of offspring in 16:1-4. While we may hear an occasional sermon or two on the "faithful" Abraham of 12:1-9 or 22:1-19, hardly a word is said of Abraham's dark side.

An exception might be Genesis 15:1-6, familiar to Lutherans through Paul's exegesis of 15:6 in Romans 4 and Galatians 3. At the outset, Abram is beginning to doubt God's promise of a son (the dark side again). It has been a long time since that particular promise was made, and Abram fears that Eliezer, his slave from Damascus, will inherit instead of his promised seed. God's response to Abram's lack of trust is to bring him outside, show him the stars of the sky, and repeat the promise, "So shall your descendants be!" after which, the narrator informs us,

“he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.” As good Lutherans, we read the text this way because Paul did (Romans 4:3, 9, 22; Galatians 3:6; see James 2:23). Paul was trying to show that faith comes before the giving of the law. Abraham was justified by his faith apart from works of the law because there was, as yet, no law to keep.

Paul’s cogent argument is typical of the rabbinic exegesis of his day and certainly upholds his doctrine of justification by faith. But notice that the NRSV has had to insert the words “the LORD” before “reckoned” to arrive at this unambiguous reading in Genesis, since they are not in the Hebrew text, or in the Septuagint, or any other text, for that matter. 15:6, read apart from vv. 1–5, is ambiguous. With no indicated change of subject, it can also be read, “And he [Abram] believed the LORD; and he [Abram] reckoned it to Him [the LORD] as righteousness.” Factoring in vv. 1–5 would seem to support this reading. Since it was Abram who had a problem with God—the delay in God’s fulfillment of the promise of a son—and God Who provided an answer or at least a justification for that delay in the form of another promise—“So shall your descendants be”—it is more natural to interpret Abram’s response as, “OK, LORD, that’ll do for now,” or, in the words of our text, “And he [Abram] believed; and he [Abram] reckoned it [the LORD’s explanation] to Him [the LORD] as righteousness [an adequate response to Abram’s earlier doubts].”

On this reading, Abram still believes or better *trusts* in the Lord (6a), but only because he has received divine reassurance in the form of a repeated declaration of the promise (5b). The ordering of the material is crucial. If Abram’s response had preceded God’s promise, one might see the promise as a reward, something Abram earned for something Abram did. But here we see that the promise is something that God will do for Abram. A major theme of Genesis 12–50 is that God overcomes obstacles (usually Abra-

ham himself!) in order to keep His promises. Of paramount importance in reading the Abraham narratives is the recognition that Abraham doesn’t make promises to God; God makes promises to Abraham—and keeps them!

Such a reading might lead us to think that Abraham is freed of any responsibility. But that is not the case. 17:1 reminds us he is to walk before God and be blameless; 17:9 states he must keep the covenant; and 18:19 indicates he is to do righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abram what He has promised him. Furthermore, following the near-sacrifice of his son Isaac, God says to Abraham, “Because you have done this... I will surely bless you” (22:16b) and informs Isaac, “I will multiply your descendants... because Abraham obeyed My voice” (26:4–5), that is, *Isaac’s* descendants will be multiplied because of *Abraham’s* obedience.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously, these texts do not do away with human responsibility; we are dealing with relationships here, and relationships always involve reciprocity. But it is important to see that Abraham doesn’t obey in order to receive blessing; he obeys because he lives in relation to God and within the promise of blessing. These texts beckon us to stress the priority of that promise. Each of the three narratives of God’s promise to Abram displays the same order of command → promise → response.

**Genesis 12:1–4a:** God’s first promise to Abram

*Command:* “Go” (v. 1)

*Promise:* “I will make of you a great nation” (vv. 2–3)

*Response:* “So Abram went” (v. 4a).

**Genesis 13:14–18:** God’s second promise to Abram

*Command:* “Raise your eyes and look” (v. 14)

*Promise:* “I will give you this land and many descendants” (vv. 15–17)

*Response:* “Abram moved his tent and came and settled” (v. 18)

**Genesis 15:5–6:** God’s third promise to Abram

*Command:* “Look at the sky and count the stars” (v. 5a)

*Promise:* “So shall your offspring be” (v. 5b)

*Response:* “Abram trusted the Lord” (v. 6a).<sup>3</sup>

God’s promise clearly precedes Abraham’s response. A corollary is also of importance for those who would preach these texts: namely, the fact that God is the one Who promises to be faithful to Abraham in these stories. Yet we preach them as if they were about Abraham’s faithfulness rather than God’s.

Genesis 17 is a paradigmatic example of how wrong we are. The text comprises a series of four speeches replete with divine promises arranged concentrically around a fifth divine speech in which the covenant of circumcision is introduced, as may be seen in the following schematic representation.

- A Abram’s age v. 1a
- B YHWH appears to Abram v. 1b
- C First divine speech vv. 1c–2
- D Abram falls on his face v. 3a
- E Second divine speech vv. 3b–8
- X Third divine speech vv. 9–14
- E’ Fourth divine speech vv. 15–17
- D’ Abraham falls on face vv. 17–18
- C’ Fifth divine speech vv. 19–21
- B’ God went up from Abraham v. 22
- A’ Abraham’s age vv. 23–27

The text is a veritable flood of divine promises made to Abram/Abraham: I will make My covenant. I will make you exceedingly numerous. I will make you exceedingly fruitful. I will make nations of you. I will bring forth kings from you. I will establish My covenant between Me and you. I will give you all the land of Canaan. I will be your God. I will bless her. I will give you a son by her. I will bless her. She shall give rise to nations. Kings will come forth from her. Sarah shall bear you a son. I will establish My covenant with him. I will bless him. I will make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous. He

shall be the father of twelve princes. I will make him a great nation. I will establish My covenant with Isaac.

And what marvelous promises they are! They hammer home the main point that God is the one Who promises to be faithful here, not Abraham.

Back in ch. 16, both Abram and Sarai had underestimated the latter's importance in God's promise of a son. By suggesting that Abram take her Egyptian slave Hagar as his mistress, Sarai had denied her own physical contribution to the promised heir. After all, in terms of DNA, Ishmael was just as much Abram's son as Isaac. God's refusal to allow the promise to flow through Ishmael is based entirely on the fact that Isaac, and Isaac alone, is the son of Abram and Sarai together. Apparently, Abram's seed is insufficient. If it were enough to be Abram's son, then Ishmael would certainly qualify. Thus, Sarai's unique bodiliness is equally important to the divine plan.

In ch. 17, it is explicitly stated that though Ishmael will receive blessing, Isaac will be the bearer of the covenant (vv. 19–21). In addition, the significance of this covenant is marked by God's changing Abram's name to Abraham and, in a parallel speech in the concentric structuring of this passage (E and E' above), by changing Sarai's name to Sarah, the only biblical instance of God changing the name of a woman.

(E) ...and God said to him, "As for me, this is My covenant with you: you will be the father of many nations. *No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham*, for I have made you a *father of many nations*. I will make you very fruitful; *I will make nations of you*, and *kings will come from you*. I will establish My covenant as an everlasting covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after

you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God."

(E') God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, *you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah*. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that *she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her*." (NIV)

In these same speeches Sarai, now Sarah, is promised exactly the same benefits as Abram, now Abraham: namely, that they will give rise to kings and that they will become nations. Sarah's contribution and place in God's plan of blessing is no less significant than that of Abraham. And God isn't about to let Sarah (or us!) forget it.

My problem with these stories is that I constantly try to read them as if Abraham or Sarah were the main characters. And I get confused about whether I'm supposed to "be like Abraham" or not. Which Abraham? The Abraham who willingly obeyed God's horrendous request to sacrifice his son? I couldn't do that. The Abraham who just as willingly endangered the life of his wife to save his own skin? I hope I couldn't do that.

In terms of Lutheran hermeneutics, "be like Abraham," like its New Testament counterpart "what would Jesus do?" can only function as law, not gospel. As such it cannot give us life and hope but only make demands of us. "What has Jesus done?" makes more sense in our hermeneutical context, at least if the answer to the proposed question is, "What I, as a poor creature bound by sin, cannot do." Such a reading lifts up the life-giving character of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension as gospel. We are not summoned to emulate Jesus; the standard is too high and can only result in dis-

appointment. Rather, we are called to receive him gratefully and rejoice in his salvation. In the same way, "be like Abraham" is hardly good news. Such a hermeneutic again confronts us with the demands of the law, even if the possibility of attaining the Abrahamic standard is a matter of improbability rather than impossibility.

But what if these stories are not really about Abraham and Sarah at all? What if the protagonist in the drama is God and the story is about how God faithfully keeps all His promises despite Abraham's dark side and the obstacles that he and Sarah put in the way? Then these stories don't call us to "be like Abraham" or Sarah either; to emulate their somewhat spotty faith, or model our lives on their sometimes questionable example. On the contrary! The stories seek to convince us that "we *are* like Abraham" or Sarah, and the glorious good news of the gospel is that God knows exactly how to deal with people like us, people just like Abraham and Sarah who are capable of great faith and great doubt, obedience as well as failure.

By changing their names, God changed their vision and challenged them to believe in new beginnings and transformed futures. God changed our names when we were baptized. Can we not find ways to share with our congregations the challenge and hope that lies ahead for us in Christ?

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#### Notes

1. Though the texts display some degree of overlap and repetition, only Isaiah and Psalms have more entries in the version of the Revised Common Lectionary used by the ELCA than the ancestral traditions of Genesis 12–50. Jeremiah has the same number.

2. Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 85.

3. *Ibid.*