

The legacy of Sarah and Abraham

A sermon on Genesis 17 and Romans 4

Paul Keim

Has anybody here seen my old friends, Sarai and Avram? Can you tell me where “the Princess” and “the Exalted Ancestor” have gone?

Maybe they moved without leaving a forwarding address. Or perhaps they changed their names. It happens. People come to be called by informal variations of their more formal given names, or by nicknames derived from diminutives, titles, social position, personal characteristics, or other associations.

You’re probably looking for Sarah, the PrinCESS, and Avraham, the Ancestor of Many Nations. These “new” names actually represent regional or dialectical variations of the same names—as Bob is to Robert, as Patty is to Patricia. The renaming here is a form of word play called *paronomasia*. Ancient literature, including the Bible, is full of such popular etymologies whereby a poetic bond is formed between memory and identity. In this case, a promise of progeny has been made all the more confounding in the face of chronic barrenness. No need to overinterpret here. It’s like a joke. Seriously.

So on this second Sunday of Lent, incongruously reclaimed from the Mother Church by the wayward children of the radical wing of the Protestant Reformation, we evoke the carnivalesque echoes of our congregation’s own wry appropriation of this most sober season. You want irony? You want *paronomasia*? You want paradox? Read Genesis 17 in Hebrew and you can have it all. Imagine a treasure house of gems hidden beneath the rich topsoil of the text, and we the gardeners, sifting the loamy fields with grammar, syntax, and vocabulary as our rake and hoe and plow. And with each soiling of the hands in this hermeneutical horticulture, that which was hidden is emerging. Yes, sisters and brothers, you can have it all. Taste and see that the Word is good! Can I get an Amen?

And it isn't just the business of the names. As we dig further we find that Avram's response to the promise of many descendants is the very same as Av-raham's reaction to the news of Sarah's impending motherhood: He falls on his face and he laughs [yitshaq]. He says to himself, "Can a hundred-year-old man become a father, or a ninety-nine-year-old woman have a child?" In the rarified echelons of higher literary analysis, we call that a rhetorical question.

The Yahwist's grand iteration of the promise of numerous descendants to the childless couple in Genesis 15 presents us with a patriarch who "believed YHWH and it was credited to him as righteousness" (or as Ted Hiebert translates in the Common English Bible, "Abram trusted the LORD, and the LORD recognized Abram's high moral character"). But here in Genesis 17, Abraham's faith response to the assurances of El Shaddai takes the somewhat odd form of a desperate appeal: "If only you would accept Ishmael!" No, God replies [chuckling?], your nonagenarian

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prinCESS will bear the child, and you will name him [godly guffaws?] Yitshaq—"God laughs" [thunderous peals of belly-busting hilarity?].

We say "Isaac" and miss the point entirely. But I think it was intended to be funny, and theologically normative. God laughs. And if that's true then we need an incarnational Christology of humor. Parody and paradox permeate the biblical text, delivered by incongruous twists in stories from Balaam to Jonah, as well as many examples of subtle

wordplay that defy the translator's craft. Surely the politically charged atmosphere of first-century Palestine was not only dangerous but full of delicious ironies. There's not much of that in your text of the New Testament, you say? Ah, but you must consider the subtext. Or watch Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, which shows us Jesus-wept Christians what we can't allow ourselves to perceive. That piety and blasphemy are not opposites or enemies, but siblings of the same mother.

So Sarah and Abraham laughed and lived "as if," and it was credited to them as righteousness. The child of promise is born

and named. [One can just imagine the exclamations of the exasperated teachers at the local yeshiva: Isaac, wipe that smile off your face! But I can't, Miss. It's almost as if God is laughing within me!] And what is the substance of faith that emerges from this patriarchal and matriarchal legacy?

Whatever else it might be, I suggest to you that in this tradition, faith is not about giving verbal ascent to certain creedal formulations. Biblical faith is about living as if something were true, not blindly, not irrationally, but in the absence of empirical proof. Biblical faith is about loyalty, trust, devotion—about durative commitments lived out over time, and thus not easily reducible to creedal scrutiny. Biblical faith, according to most of the narratives, and the laments and the prophecies, is about failing, about acknowledging responsibility, about receiving forgiveness, about starting over. Biblical faith is mostly about human failure, and the possibility of redemptive transformations.

Nor is the lack of faith to be equated with an inability to give verbal ascent to creedal formulations. If faith is not reducible to creedal testimony, then neither should the absence or rejection of a creed or its parts be equated with faithlessness. What we really believe is the way we live.

Creeks do have their place in the life of a community of faith. Their uses may include the following: a shorthand description of who we are, naming the virtues toward which, together, we strive; a mechanism by which we pledge our devotion to God, expressed in our service to one another and the world; a strategy of centeredness, inclusion, and embrace, whereby the estranged are reunited and the stranger is welcomed. But the provisional truths of our creeds should never be reified or equated with the actions to which they point. Nor should they become instruments of exclusion, marginalization, or control.

Paul's theological rationale for the inclusion of Gentiles in Romans 4 is admittedly convoluted and tortuous. But here he makes an astute observation of the patriarchal tradition that "Abra'am [the Greek form of the name] believed," and Paul turns it into a momentous metaphor of spiritual solidarity. It's a skillful little Midrash on a deeply familiar piece of scripture that Paul turns inside out and rides like a pretty pony. Though the Genesis narrative is focused on the promise of descendants in the face of

biological barrenness—thus the fanciful folk-etymology of Avram “Exalted Ancestor” to Av-raham “Father of a Multitude”—Paul rightly points out that the ancestor of the faith is declared righteous before he has a chance to obey the command to circumcise. And so he can become an ancestor of faith for the uncircumcised as well as for the circumcised, for the foreigner as well as for the native.

Outsiders have a way of getting in, actually or figuratively, and proving their worth. It is a point made over and over in the biblical narrative. It is the story of the brave Canaanite women

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Rahab and Tamar, and the Moabite Ruth. In each case a foreign woman exhibits loyalty and devotion that surpasses and outshines that of the native born. It is the same point that brought Jesus’ promising ministry to an abrupt hiatus just as it was beginning—and almost cost him his life (Luke 4). By evoking Na’aman the Syrian and the widow of Sidon before the adoring crowd in the hometown synagogue of Nazareth, Jesus fails the ethnocentric litmus test and must flee the blood-thirsty crowd.

And this Paul (remember his name was Shaul/Saul before he fell off his horse on the way to Damascus)—he advocates for inclusion from the position of privilege. He is a circumcised insider pleading with his fellow insiders to throw open the gates, because that is the true religion of Abra’am.

Is there perhaps a message here for us as fellow insiders? This congregation is a great place. I know you wouldn’t be here this morning if you didn’t agree. I can’t think of any community of faith where I’d rather worship, or drink coffee. But you know, we can also be smug. We don’t mean to be. And intentionality is three-quarters of righteousness, right? I fear, however, that our many virtues are mirrored by vices that we can’t see very well. *For we know whom we have believ-ed, and are persuaded that we are able to keep that which we’ve committed unto him against that day.*

Frankly, I think I feel so comfortable here because many of you share my kind of “benign” smugness. It is invisible to most of us

most of the time. But it is evident to some outsiders, and painfully obvious to insiders among us who are marginalized. We're smug about all kinds of things, from our brilliant biblical exposition, to our integral small-group structure; from our creative freedom and quirky eccentricities, to our great music and eclectic preaching; from our progressive politics and evident fecundity, to our sustainability and our erudite profundity.

As sins go, it scarcely rises to the level of serious malfeasance. Nothing compared to what *those* Christians perpetrate (and we know who *they* are). One might even begin to suspect that we have earned our way, that we are declared righteous not as an act of grace but as the wages of a job well done. But perhaps we can ask ourselves why our embrace of diversity has produced a rather peculiar homogeneity. We do not have to be all things to all people in the city of Goshen or in Elkhart County or the world. But how might our embrace be extended beyond its current parameters of class and race and education?

Another chapter in the faith legacy of Sarah and Abraham is found in what is likely a less familiar text, the 2nd Sura of the Qur'an:

As Ibrahim and Ishmael built up the foundations of the House [they prayed]: Our Lord, You who hear all and know all, accept this from us. Make us Muslims (i.e., those devoted solely to you). Make our descendants into a community of Muslims (i.e., a community of those devoted solely to you). Show us how to worship and accept our repentance, for You are the Ever Compassionate and the Most Merciful. Our Lord, raise up a messenger from among them, to impart your message to them. Teach them the Book and the wisdom, and purify them, for indeed you are mighty and wise.

Who but a fool would forsake the faith of Ibrahim? We have chosen him in this world and he will rank among the righteous in the Hereafter. His Lord said to him, Aslim (i.e., devote yourself). Ibrahim replied, Aslamtu (i.e., I devote myself solely to the Lord of the universe). And Ibrahim left this legacy to his children. As did Jacob, saying: My children, Allah has chosen this faith for you,

so make sure you remain Muslims (i.e., those devoted solely to God), until your dying moment.

Were you there to see when death came upon Jacob? When he asked his children, What will you worship after I am gone? they replied, We shall worship your God and the God of your ancestors, Ibrahim, Ishmael, and Isaac. And we shall remain Muslims (i.e., those devoted solely to the one God).

They say, Become Jews or Christians, and you will be rightly guided. But say to them: [Ours] is the faith of Ibrahim, the monotheist, who did not worship any god but Allah. Say simply: We believe in Allah and in what was revealed to us; revealed to Ibrahim, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes; revealed to Moses, Jesus and to all the prophets by their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and we remain Muslims (i.e., those devoted solely to God). So if they believe like you do, they will be rightly guided. But if they turn their backs, then they will be the ones who have deviated. The God who hears all and knows all will protect you from them.

And say also: Our life takes its colors from God. Which colors could be better than those of the One whom we worship? (2:127–38)

Let our lives reflect the colors of God insofar as our eyes reflect our love for each other, our devotion to this Assembly of small groups and the wider community of faith of which it is a part. Let our lives reflect the colors of God as we acknowledge the grace that sustains us every day, as we confess our smugness, and as we continue to do the work that flows from hearts of flesh. Let the hidden things emerge in this fast before the feast. Amen.

About the author

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