

“A Counternarrative to the Narrative of Chosenness”

Genesis 21:8-21

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June 21, 2020

We might wonder why the story we have read today from Genesis 21 is in the Bible. It is almost as disturbing as next week's story from Genesis 22 in which God seems to ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. At least in this story it is the human characters who don't come off looking good. But why would the author(s) of Genesis include this story?

The focus of Genesis is upon a special relationship between God and a line of people beginning with Abraham and Sarah. They form a covenant, God makes certain promises to the people, requiring their faithfulness, and God ultimately makes good on these promises. Hagar and Ishmael have nothing to do with this, and their treatment in this story does not make our heroes look very good.

Backing up a bit, God has promised to make a great nation of Abraham and Sarah, but they have not been able to have a child, and they are both getting up there in age, really getting up there. They would most definitely be in the high-risk category for COVID-19. So, panicking a bit about this, Sarah explicitly asks her servant, her slave, Hagar, to sleep with her husband so that they can have a child.

This all takes place in Genesis 16. It is noted there that Hagar is Sarah's Egyptian slave girl. A Midrash says she is Pharaoh's daughter, a princess who would rather be a slave in Sarah's house than royalty in her own. This is a Jewish perspective, not an Egyptian one, but the point is she is a slave who is at the mercy of her master. So, when Sarah tells her to sleep with her husband, she does what she is told.

But when a child is born, Ishmael is his name, which means “God hears,” Hagar looks on Sarah with contempt and Sarah is furious. Abraham tells her she can do whatever she wants — she is the master — and Sarah treats Hagar harshly, whereupon Hagar runs away. Her name means “to flee” and flee she does, quite understandably, until an angel of Lord finds her by a spring of water and encourages her to return.

All of this happens before we join the story today. Now, Sarah has finally been able to have a child — Isaac — and when she sees him playing with Hagar’s son, Ishmael, she begins to worry — perhaps about competition between the boys, sibling rivalry; perhaps about which son will receive the most affection from Abraham and how this might affect his feelings for her. Lest we think the concern is without foundation, when Sarah demands that Hagar and Ishmael be cast out, rather than supporting his wife’s wishes, as before, Abraham is distressed. He has grown fond of Ishmael. He doesn’t want any harm to come to him.

But at this point, God intervenes, telling Abraham to go along with Sarah’s wishes and not worry about Ishmael because God will make a great nation of him too. Hagar and Ishmael will be okay — more than okay — God will take care of them.

So, they are cast out, and it begins to look pretty grim for them. Hagar sends Ishmael off a distance so that she doesn’t have to watch him die. But when she lifts up her voice and weeps, a kind of prayer, whether she uses God language or not, God hears the boy – whose name, we recall, means “God hears” — and surely her too. God asks what is troubling her and promises to make a great nation of Ishmael. Then, God opens Hagar’s eyes so that she can see a nearby well of water. She fills a skin with water, gives some to Ishmael, they both survive and Ishmael becomes father to a great nation — the Arab people.

So, all’s well that ends well for Hagar and Ishmael. And God comes off looking pretty, as God should. But what about Abraham and Sarah? They have a slave woman, not a good image right now. They take advantage of her and then kick her out, only to be bailed out by God. Why would anyone include this narrative? It does demonstrate the resilience of enslaved people, and I suppose we might argue that if God can use flawed people like Abraham and Sarah, God can use us. But is there any other reason to include this story?

Yes, there is. This story provides a counternarrative to the dominant narrative of chosenness. It is a common practice in scripture, especially within the Hebrew canon, to provide a counternarrative. The dominant narrative is that God rewards the righteous with blessings, but

even we know that sometimes good people suffer. So, the canon includes the book of Job which explores the counternarrative of a righteous man suffering. The dominant narrative is that the hand of Providence guides everything, but even we know that sometimes terrible things happen, the malicious get their way. So, the canon includes a counternarrative which factors in the consequences of free will and thus, innocents are slaughtered in Bethlehem. This is not God's doing.

The book of Genesis is a book of beginnings in many ways — the name itself means “beginning” — and one thing it begins is the dominant narrative of chosenness. God chooses a people to work with and through, beginning with Abraham and Sarah. Scripture will eventually note the purpose of choosing one nation is so that this nation can be a light for all other nations. They are chosen not just for themselves but for others. Yet they are chosen while others are not.

But our text launches a counternarrative that will show up in many other places, like in the book of Jonah where God cares about the Ninevites. Those who are not among the official category of chosen — Hagar and Ishmael — are loved and favored by God, indeed with a blessing very much like the one given to Abraham and Sarah, to be the founders of a great nation. The ultimate point of this counternarrative is to demonstrate God's loving concern for all people. No matter how we understand the term “chosen,” no one is left out.

So, perhaps God is like many grandparents. I don't know how many times I have heard a grandchild say at a grandparent's funeral that the grandparent loved all the grandchildren but this grandchild the best. Yet, inevitably, the grandchild adds — of course, she told everyone he/she was her favorite. God has a lot of favorites. In fact, we are all God's favorites. This doesn't mean God is fickle. It means God's love is not limited or scarce like ours. There is enough to go around. So, the fact that you are loved doesn't mean I am loved any less.

It is a wonderful word we all need to hear, but it is also a counternarrative to the dominant narratives of chosenness in our time.

Judaism has certainly held on to the idea of being a chosen people, though many Jews understand chosenness as a calling to be a light for

the nations, they underscore God's concern for all, and the reality is that ancient Israel never was a powerful entity. To say this nation was "chosen" was a way of bolstering the self-esteem of a fragile people.

But before we consider criticizing Judaism, we might want to take a look at our own faith. Scripture includes texts that are inclusive and texts that are exclusive, but many, if not most, Christians, believe there is no other way to salvation except through Jesus. Never mind the fact that billions of people have never heard of Jesus or have grown up in contexts where they learned about God through a different tradition. From this perspective, we are the chosen people, the *only* chosen people.

I don't have time here to address all of the reasons why we might want to reconsider this perspective, but at the end of the day, whether we believe that only Christians will be saved or that God will include others who believe in God, including Jews and Muslims, God will decide, not us. The two things we can say conclusively are that the Creator of us all loves all of creation and God's ways are not our ways, God's thoughts are not our thoughts. So, as a mentor of mine once said, the three most profound words about judgment day were spoken by Gomer Pyle: "Surprise, surprise, surprise!"

The counternarrative of God's love for all can modify our feelings of chosenness as Christians, but these feelings can be even more precise. There is a reason why people tell jokes about Baptists in heaven living behind a wall because they like to think they are the only ones there. Christians may be chosen, but Baptist Christians are the most chosen of all, though to be fair, I have known a number of Catholics, Orthodox believers and others who were just as exclusive. It is fine to see the richness of our tradition, but it is healthy to make space for a counternarrative which recognizes the value of other traditions.

Yet the present-day struggle with chosenness is not limited to religious ideation. We live in chosen nation, do we not? Our nation is the best, our people are the best, God favors us the most, or at least many claim that this is the case. In the words of the Puritans who settled in this land, we are a city set on a hill, America is God's light to the world, just like ancient Israel. And to be sure, this is a wonderful nation, even with all of its flaws. Where else are people free to worship in

different ways, to protest on the left and the right and everywhere in between, to keep trying to make things better in every generation?

But anyone who embraces all that goes with this line of thought seems to have missed out on the biblical claim that God tried to save the world through one nation and it didn't work. So, rather than trying the same strategy again, God chose a different strategy — not a nation but the life, death and resurrection of a son named Jesus. Anyone who embraces the idea that America is a “Christian nation” not only has an inaccurate view of history but an inadequate understanding of scripture.

But not only this, anyone who fully embraces this view of our chosenness misses the counternarrative of how chosen other people around this world are. The people of every nation, ethnicity and faith are children of God, and there are fellow Christians in nations around the world. In fact, Christians in a number of third-world countries are sending missionaries to us because they believe that our faith is thriving more in their context than ours, and thus they have something to give us. We live in a wonderful nation, but it is not the one chosen nation.

So, this counternarrative of God's love for all provides a helpful perspective on our chosenness as Christians, Baptists and Americans, and there are other kinds of chosenness — in regard to race, gender and identity. On the one hand, for me, this is fine. I am as chosen as one can be — I am not only an American, Baptist Christian; I am a straight white male. I don't feel a need to apologize for any of these qualities. I only chose the Baptist and Christian parts. But I also know that in every one of these categories, those who are other than me are less chosen in some ways, less favored by our culture, yet not by God. So, what do I do with that? What is my responsibility as one so chosen?

I don't have an easy answer other than to know deep down that I have some responsibility. From people to whom much is given, much is expected. That too is in scripture — Luke 12:48. I am called to share light with those who experience darkness. I am called to do something good with my chosenness. And I am called to let others know that they too are chosen by God, valued, loved with an everlasting love. As the hymnwriter says, the love of God is broader than the measure of our mind; and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.

As the story ends, the text says God was with the boy and he grew up. Ishmael lived in the wilderness and became an expert with a bow. His mother found a wife for him and he thrived. He and Hagar lived apart from Abraham, Sarah and Isaac, but when Abraham died, scripture says the two sons of Abraham — Isaac and Ishmael — buried him together (Genesis 25:9). It is a hopeful image for divided families, faiths and nations. The story ends with Isaac and Ishmael being favored and brought together. The counternarrative prevails. All are chosen. All are included in God's love.

How will our story end? What we will do with our chosenness?