

INTRODUCTION

IN BOTH THE Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, particular themes, or even verses, emerge as foundational or central. Indeed some parts have been elevated to such places of prominence that they have gained universal acclaim. In this regard, certainly Psalm 23 and John 3:16 come readily to mind. And while it is the case that there is some value here, it strikes me that we ought not isolate sections of the text at the expense of the whole. In the case of the Abraham narratives, perhaps not surprisingly, the faith of Abraham, his righteousness, and God's promises to him and Sarah are given prominence. One could understand this emphasis, as the focus of these themes is positive, is not overly challenging, and (most important) is central to Christian belief. However, the entirety of these narratives is lengthy and complex; to reduce the difficult and complex parts to the most understandable and satisfying common denominator is to do a disservice to the text.

As I read the Abraham narratives, I am immediately struck by the human drama and the divine involvement in all aspects of the human journey. This drama, it seems to me, is exactly the broad point of departure for entering the story in a way that allows the story the possibility of becoming our story. Thus we discern in the story both the strengths and frailties of what it means to be human: the possibilities and the shortcomings, the persistence of faith together with moments of challenging doubts. Equally or perhaps more important, the narrative tells us something about God, about the nature of God and the manner in which God functions in the world. Thus, as surprising as it is to begin a new journey with barrenness, this surprising beginning, in fact, tells us more about God than about Sarah and Abraham. What shapes the journey of creation is not only what God is able to do but, in fact, how and where God will choose to begin this story. Thus, barrenness is also our invitation to imagine as the divine is able

to imagine; and perhaps not surprisingly, while Abraham and Sarah believed and trusted God, it is equally clear that like all humans, they faltered, but were not abandoned.

The nature of our society has perhaps caused certain themes of the Abraham stories to recede into the shadows. Neither barrenness nor wilderness holds any great existential fear today. To be sure, the issue of fertility remains a factor—though it can be and is attended to in a variety of ways. But while the literal qualities of these themes are no longer pointedly relevant, in my view they have taken on a pronounced metaphorical importance.

The Abraham narratives form a significant component of the ancestral narratives in the book of Genesis. The opening line of the story of Abraham and Sarah announces an extraordinary reality. As readers, we realize that peoples and nations will be born out of this couple; that Sarah's barrenness becomes the principal focus of the story is particularly striking. From the beginning we know that "barrenness" will halt the future prospects for Abraham and Sarah, and it is beyond their control to transform this reality. Yet, it is precisely in the state of barrenness that promises of blessing and fulfillment come. From the outset, it is also clearly established that God will proceed from a point of challenge, as humans conceive of challenge. God proceeds outside of convention and norm. The barren receive a promise; hope comes to those who live beyond conventional hope; fulfillment comes despite constricted norms.

In this study it is precisely the tension between challenge and hope that is explored. The Abraham narratives provide for us an invitation to enter into the stories and in important ways, to allow them to become our stories. The themes of the stories are profoundly human themes. They capture the persistent interaction between God and humankind. As human beings, we are invited to witness the manner in which God enters human community in all its complexities, struggles, challenges, fears, and, ultimately, in its hope. As the Abraham story unfolds, not only is it clear that God will not be restricted by societal and cultural convention, but that the human journey will be generated by faith and doubt, fear and hope, promise and fulfillment, all the while shaped by God, the architect and navigator.

In this study I will not only explore the various themes within a variety of passages, but also I will maintain a constant eye on the implications for contemporary readers. In this regard, some of the literal and particular experiences such as *barrenness, wilderness, and wrestling with God* will be examined as metaphors for our experiences. The richness and texture of these metaphors allow us to enter these stories in a way that makes them our stories.

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