

RULING AS A SLAVE, OR SERVING AS A KING?

A Devotional Meditation on

Yom Teruah (Feast of Trumpets) / Rosh Hashanah (Head of the Year)

Genesis 21:1-22:24; 1 Samuel 1:1-2:10; Jeremiah 31:1-20; Galatians 3:29, 4:21-31

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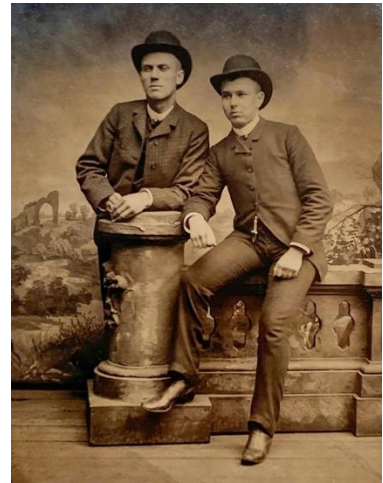
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Father Abraham had many sons, but the Bible tells the stories of only two. Ishmael was Abraham's firstborn, but Isaac was the son of promise. I'm not sure I heard in Sunday School how Hagar the slave became a surrogate mother for Sarah the free woman. Sexual exploitation is not a subject for young ears, and even after those ears are mature enough to understand, the subject of the story is how the faith of Abraham and Sarah failed.

After Sarah had waited years for God to give her a child, she advised Abraham to take Hagar as a substitute mother. That sounded good in theory, as do so many of our schemes to engineer God's promises, but they didn't think through the impact of human emotions, nor the possibility that God just might have a different way to fulfill His promises. It's only natural that Abraham would come to love his son Ishmael and desire the best for him, and that he would love Ishmael's birth mother and desire good for her. Yet it's also natural that Sarah would regret her choice borne of desperation, and grieve that an interloper and her son had become rivals for Abraham's affection. When God at last intervened, and the son of promise was born, life became more complicated for everyone. In an instant, Sarah regained her place in Abraham's affection, and Hagar and Ishmael were moved to the sidelines.

Jewish tradition says Isaac was about four years old when Abraham gave a feast to celebrate his weaning. While everyone else was enjoying the party, Ishmael did something that caused Sarah to consider him a threat to her son's life and position as Abraham's heir. It's doubtful that Ishmael tried to kill Isaac, or that he argued with him about the inheritance, but he did mock his half-brother in a way that convinced Sarah that the threat from Ishmael and his mother would only increase over time. That's why she demanded that Abraham banish Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham did so, but with a heavy heart, and only after God reminded him of two promises:

Now the matter was very displeasing in Abraham's eyes on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be displeased about the boy and your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, listen to her voice. For through Isaac shall your seed be called. Yet I will also make the son of the slave woman into a nation, because he is your seed."



Father and Son, ca. 1865. Photo by Alan Davey, July 27, 2021, [via Flickr](#).

Genesis 21:11-13 TLV

The first promise was about Isaac being the true heir, but the second promise was about Ishmael's destiny. It's a promise God repeated to Hagar when she and the boy were on the verge of death:

Then God heard the boy's voice and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and He said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid, because God has heard the boy's voice where he is. Get up! Lift the boy up, and hold on to him with your hand, for I will make him a great nation."

Genesis 21:17-18 TLV

Becoming a great nation isn't such a bad thing. Ishmael wouldn't inherit all that God promised Abraham, but at least he could be the father of a people. Who wouldn't want to be the founder of a great power among the nations? Hagar might have taken that promise as a mission to teach her son to be a wise and discerning ruler. Perhaps she could help him understand compassion and empathy, especially for the downtrodden. In Ishmael's nation, righteousness and justice would prevail, and there would be no exploitation of servants, marginalization of foreigners, or perpetual cycles of abuse.

Or she could teach him how to acquire and wield power so that, one day, he could seek revenge against his father and half-brother.

By the time Ishmael was powerful enough to do that, Isaac would have been ready to meet him. Not with swords and warriors, but with overtures of peace and reconciliation – even if it meant offering up a considerable portion of his inheritance. He did, after all, accept one of Ishmael's daughters as a wife for his son Esau, but before that, he had learned something important about power and service from his father. That happened when Isaac was almost 40 years old, and Abraham obeyed God's call to offer his son as a sacrifice. It was the ultimate test, not only of Abraham's faith, but of Isaac's obedience. Both of them passed, and in response God awarded them the ultimate prize:

The angel of *ADONAI* called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, "By myself I swear—it is a declaration of *ADONAI*—because you have done this thing, and you did not withhold your son, your only son, I will richly bless you and bountifully multiply your seed like the stars of heaven, and like the sand that is on the seashore, and your seed will possess the gate of his enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed—because you obeyed My voice."

Genesis 22:15-18 TLV

God had promised Abraham he would father many nations, but here we see the more important promise: that in his seed *all the nations* would be blessed.

It's ironic that the son of the slave woman was destined to rule, but the son of the free woman was destined to serve. Israel and other nations would come through Isaac, but Israel was to be different. Israel was never intended to be a domineering world power, but a holy nation of priests that would internalize the righteous standards of our Creator and teach them by example to all the nations.

In other nations, like those fathered by Ishmael, the poor, the widows, and the orphans would be valued according to their service to the nation. On their backs economies would be built and armies would be raised, and from them servants would cater to the pleasures

of the rulers. Foreigners would be suspect at best, never to be trusted, and always kept on the margin of society.

Not so in God's nation, where being a blessing is the rule. There the poor have value because the Creator made them in His image and built into them skills and abilities to change their reality for the better. Orphans are valued because, knowing what it means to be without parents, they have potential to be the best possible parents, and living expressions of our Heavenly Father's love. Widows have value because the prayers they utter are infused with the joys and griefs of this world, and the hope of a world where there is no need for bitter lessons born of sorrow. The foreigner has value because she brings a different perspective on life, and because she may one day be part of the blessed nation, increasing its capacity for blessing to those yet far off.

The irony is perfect. The freeborn son is given rulership, but chooses to be a channel of blessing through obedience and service. The slave-born son is given the opportunity to bless through service, but covets rulership. One bends others to his will, compelling them to accept his definitions of good and evil. The other points toward the Creator, the true Ruler of all, and the only one qualified to define good and evil.

Yet the irony is bitter, for the servant nation of Abraham's seed has always been filled with slaves who grasp for rulership in the name of service to Abraham's God. In so doing, they strengthen the slave-born nations, whose true ruler is the Deceiver who has always grasped for power. He would rather rule in hell than serve in heaven. Abraham's Seed, however, taught us that it is far better to serve, even in hell. The question for us is the same Paul asked: does the witness of our lives identify us as children of the slave woman, or of the free?