

The most dangerous text in the Bible Genesis 15:1- 18

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Our story for today is about covenant making, a bizarre covenant-making which on the face of it, seems to come from prehistoric caveman times, with animal carcasses and torches and smoking pots. It is also a story of chosenness. As we read in our text, Abraham is chosen by God to have descendants as numerous as the stars. Today I would like to talk first about the covenant making ceremony itself and then I want to talk about what it means to be chosen by God—which is really at the heart of this text and of all the stories having to do with Abraham and Sarah.

To understand why there is a covenant making ceremony at all we have to flip back to chapter 12 in Genesis. In that chapter God tells Abraham: Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." When God says this, Abraham is a virile 75 years old and Sarah, a demure 65. Oddly enough, Abraham is excited at the prospect of being a father, even if it might mean playing piggy back and catch when he's eighty. He and Sarah, their other family members and their slaves pack up their bags and move to the land of Canaan. Then Abraham and Sarah wait and wait some more. In our scripture passage for today, we read that Abraham begins to have doubts that God's promise will ever come about. The clock is ticking, or the sundial, anyway. Abraham is becoming increasingly less virile and Sarah is beginning to lose her girlish charm. Consequently Abraham asks God for some assurance that he still intends to act on his holy promise. That is when God decides to hold a covenant ceremony.

Now a covenant is like a contract without lawyers. So, even though the covenant ceremony may **look** to be from caveman times, in some ways it is far and away better than the way we make contracts today. God asks Abraham to gather together the things that they will need—dead animals, a saw, a torch, a pot and a book of matches. Abraham sets everything up. He cuts the dead animals into pieces and lights a fire under the pot. Then, when it is night, God proceeds with the ceremony. God walks between the cut up animal carcasses with the lit torch and flaming firepot.

In several ways this is different from your normal, ancient covenanting ceremony. I know that because there is another covenant ceremony similar to this one described in the book of Jeremiah. Most

times the two parties to a covenant are **visible**. You can see them carrying their torches and smoking pots as they walk between the cut up pieces of animal carcasses. In this covenant ceremony the torch and smoking pot seem to be floating through air. That is because God is carrying them and God is invisible. Two, God is the only active participant in the covenant making ceremony when normally both parties participate. That is because this is a one sided covenant. Three, as in all ancient covenant ceremonies God serves as witness and notary public but in this one, God also serves as one party to the covenant.

Now on to talk about chosenness. Here we have to get serious. Because chosenness is a serious topic. The story of Abraham and Sarah and God's promise to make of them a great nation, has been embraced not only by the Jewish faith tradition, but by Christians and Muslims as well. And as we know it is at the heart of a great deal of conflict up to this very moment.

Jews declare themselves to be recipients of the covenant through Isaac, who was the second son of Abraham but the first son of Sarah. They therefore stake a claim to God's blessing and also to the real estate, which was once called Canaan and is now called Israel and Palestine.

The Muslims declare themselves to be recipients of the covenant through Ishmael, the first son of Abraham by his relationship with the slave Hagar. The Muslims stake a claim to God's blessing and also to the real estate which, as we said before, was once called Canaan and is now called Israel and Palestine.

Christians declare themselves to be recipients of the covenant through Jesus. We are Abraham's adopted spiritual descendants and we too stake a claim to God's blessing although we have no apparent interest in the real estate. (see page 79 in *The Misunderstood Jew* by Amy Jill Levine)

So what we now have is a wrangling over who really owns the blessing and who really owns the land, and the case has been stuck in probate for the last 4000 years! The wrangling has led to violence the world over and throughout the centuries—think crusades, progroms, the holocaust, the war in the Middle East, and Islamic terrorists. In all of this violence, presumably God takes the side of God's chosen people. Only which chosen people exactly is that? You see why I say that this is the most dangerous text in the Bible.

It's a complicated issue, this "who is chosen," and isn't it remarkable that it all started way back in the bronze age with animal carcasses, a torch and a smoking pot? In an age when we are increasingly

global and we are becoming increasingly dependent on each other for our needs and wants, there is no room for this concept of chosenness.

Just how global are we?

This past week, I had computer printer problems. I phoned Hewlett Packard's technical hotline. A technician named Aston answered my call. Our conversation occurred at noon my time, midnight his time in Calcutta, India. At the beginning of what would become an hour long phone call, we both remarked that it is indeed "a small world," that we could talk to each other over such a long distance. While Aston and I waited fifteen minutes for the printer to warm up we chatted, I in my smooth and slightly southern accent and he in his lilting Indian version of the same English language. Aston asked me what I did for a living. When I told Aston I was a pastor, he said that although he is Muslim, all the major religions are represented in close proximity in his home city. He respects all religious traditions as means to the same end, which is spiritual oneness with our creator. That is a far cry from Genesis!

"In fact," said the affable Aston, "I once played Jesus' father, what's his name, Joseph, in a Christmas pageant at a church near my home." As we continued to wait for the printer to do its thing, Aston recited the Lord's prayer for me just to show me how much he respects my Christian tradition. Sad to say, the prayer did not help the state of my printer. Sad to say, too, I could not recite a Muslim prayer to him.

Yes, we are becoming increasingly global but we are stuck with this passage from Genesis about how God chooses one group of people over another group of people. And you've got religious people in our increasingly global world today who take this text seriously, and use it as an excuse for bloodshed. How do we reconcile this passage to life in the 21st century?

And you think I have the answer?! There are times in a pastor's life when it is best just to ask the questions. I made that up, but it sounds great and it relieves me of a terrific burden.

As you have already guessed, I do not like this most dangerous text in the Bible. Oh, I like the fact that it depicts God as intimately concerned with the world, and the individuals in it. We are definitely more to our God "than flies to wanton boys, who kill us for their sport." to quote Shakespeare. God enters into Abraham's and Sarah's life together. God hears their cries. God responds to their distress. It is comforting that Genesis depicts God as having a plan for humanity. As chaotic as the world sometimes seems, God has not left us to our own devices. God is always one step ahead, planning our future. These are theological concepts that

we can appreciate and that we can take with us into our religiously pluralistic future. But what do we do with chosenness?

As I sat at my desk this week and brooded about that, I decided that perhaps the field of law would offer a way out of our dilemma. And here I have to confess that it isn't true what I said earlier about it being a good thing that lawyers didn't exist in Abraham's day. Some of my best friends...(you know the rest). I thought to my self, if theology can't help us, perhaps the law can. My daughter, Emily, is dating a man who is a law school student. He's also a Christian. I gave him a call. We discussed the covenant ceremony as described in Genesis. He knew the passage of which I spoke.

I told him, "I disagree with the covenant. It has caused so much bloodshed over the millennia. So, I guess what I want to know, as a soon-to-be lawyer, do you see any loopholes?" It is providential that Emily's boyfriend had just finished a class in contract law. He was up on his loopholes.

After a good chuckle he had this to say: "When a person dies without leaving a will, as did Abraham, the court will try to effectuate the intent of the Grantor. The grantor in this case is Abraham. But the courts would probably want to go back to the original grantor, who is God. You will remember that only God and Abraham were privy to that covenant and the only real witness was God. So, there would be questions. It might be argued that God had a conflict of interests. Also, it was a one sided contract. That means there was no consideration on Abraham's part. In contracts there has to be consideration on both sides. Finally, we could say that the contract was unconscionable. That is, the parties to the contract were of unequal status. You've got God, the omnipotent and omniscient creator of all that is, as one party to the contract, and then you Abraham. Who's to say that Abraham did not agree to the covenant under duress?"

That's a lot of loop holes. Probably they aren't the best of loop holes, but for now they will have to do. Abraham and God made a covenant. It was a covenant that lasted 4000 years. Now it's time to challenge that covenant as a first step in a long road to achieving peace. May it be so for Jews, Muslims and Christians. Amen