

Dysfunctional Families of the Bible

Session Two: Parents

As we saw last week, most of the people God worked with in the Bible had terrible marriages. Let us see how these terrible marriages visited terrible affects upon the children of those marriages.

Abraham, the man who loved God but clearly hated his wife (can one make this statement without it being a contradiction in terms? I doubt it), managed to find time to be an even worse father than a husband. We see this fact in his treatment of both his sons.

Ishmael is Abram's eldest son, the son of his concubine Hagar. When Sarai fails repeatedly to become pregnant, she gets impatient with God's plan and, like many people who have been abused, becomes an abuser herself. She forces her slave Hagar into the same sexual slavery Abram had forced her into in Egypt (Genesis 16:1-4). As soon as Hagar becomes pregnant, her position in the household rises, as she becomes a concubine rather than a slave – possibly even a second wife.¹ Having power, perhaps for the first time in her life, Hagar begins to elevate herself above Sarai, the primary wife, since she, Hagar, is now in position to provide Abram with his only heir (even if her child were to be a girl, Abram would bestow upon this daughter's husband his goods). Such a power shift enrages Sarai who had planned to adopt Hagar's baby herself, thereby keeping

¹ [HAGAR - JewishEncyclopedia.com](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com).

Hagar in the lesser place of concubine rather than second wife and herself as the undisputed most powerful woman in the household.²

Sarai appeals to Abram who immediately backs her (Genesis 16:5-6), something he will repeatedly do in regards to household matters; perhaps this behavior is a result of his guilty conscience over the Egypt episode; perhaps it points to something darker: a wish to keep his robes clean.

Abram sits idly by while Sarai “afflicts”³ the pregnant Hagar to the point where she runs away, presumably in fear of losing her pregnancy. Once again, God champions the person with no champion and rescues Hagar, assuring her that she will carry to term, that her son will be a great and free man who will be in accord with his neighbors (Genesis 16:6-14 – English translations notwithstanding!).⁴

Once Ishmael is born and has lived with his father, mother and Sarai for thirteen years, Isaac is born. When Isaac is a toddler and has been weaned – a milestone in a time when infant mortality is extremely high and reaching weaning age (sometime between two and four) means the child has a greater likelihood of living to adulthood – Sarah and Abraham celebrate with a party (Genesis 21:8).

² We can see this dynamic occurring in the marriage of Jacob and Leah and Rachel. Both primary wives, Leah and Rachel give their slaves Zilpah and Bilhah (respectively) to Jacob as concubines to “bear children on their behalf.” Zilpah is the mother of Gad and Asher; Bilhah is the mother of Dan and Naphtali. Leah and Rachel maintained their power over the secondary wives by claiming the right of naming the sons (Genesis 30:3-13).

³ The same word and form used in Exodus 1:11 to describe how the Egyptians treat the Israelites.

⁴ Every English translation of the Bible I have read mistranslated Genesis 16:12 and says that “his hand against everyone and everyone’s hand against him.” This translation is in complete error, as even the Jewish Encyclopedia attests that this verse states Ishmael will be “respected by his brethren” [HAGAR - JewishEncyclopedia.com](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com).

At this party, Sarah sees Isaac and Ishmael together and immediately decides that Ishmael has to go. Everything hinges on Genesis 21:9.

Genesis 21:9 reads: “Sarah noticed the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had born to Abraham *“mtsahekh”* -ing with her son Isaac.” Now how do we translate *“mtsahekh”*? That is indeed the question. My most trusted lexicon translates the word as “to make fun of,” citing this verse as the example for the translation.⁵ Every other lexicon I consulted simply states that the word means “play” and cites Genesis 21:9 as an example of this meaning. Uh oh!

There is a vast tradition of whitewashing Sarah⁶ and her motivation for expelling Ishmael and Hagar.⁷ The first meaning of this word is simply “joke”⁸ and many translators use this translation or simply state that Ishmael is “playing” with his toddler brother. Therefore, Sarah’s motivation for ordering Abraham to throw Hagar and Ishmael out might not be protecting Ishmael from a cruel older brother.

Genesis 21:10 seems to confirm that my favorite lexicon is in error here. (Egad!). The verse reads: “so she [Sarah] demanded of Abraham: “Drive out that slave and her son! No son of that slave is

⁵ :” Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT)*, vol. 2, (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2001), קדף p. 1019.

⁶ Here is one of the most egregious examples: [Ishmael: Abraham's Other Son - Jewish History \(chabad.org\)](http://chabad.org). No Biblical basis for anything in this article exists.

⁷ [Sarah - Jewish History \(chabad.org\)](http://chabad.org); this article basically glorifies everything Sarai/Sarah does, going so far as to take Genesis 20:12 literally; however if this statement were true (that Sarai and Abram were half-siblings, the Bible would have had no problem describing Sarai as “daughter of Terah,” which it markedly doesn’t. The Old Testament never quibbles about describing blood relationships in marriages (see for example Exodus 6:20, which casually informs us that Moses’ parents were aunt and nephew).

⁸ Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT)*, vol. 2, (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2001), קדף p. 1019.

going to share the inheritance with my son Isaac!” No mention of Isaac’s safety is mentioned here and presumably Sarah would have mentioned something, perhaps exaggerating and saying she feared for Isaac’s life if Ishmael were allowed to stay if she had genuinely seen Ishmael mistreating his brother in any way.

Commentators remain divided on their interpretations, depending upon their theological, religious, linguistic, cultural and/or political leanings. Ironically, even the Jewish Encyclopedia, originating from 1906, provides contrasting views. The entry on Hagar states “that when Isaac had been weaned Ishmael ‘played’ with him or ‘mocked’ him (מַצַּחֵק is ambiguous), and that Sarah demanded of Abraham that he cast out Hagar and her son, that the latter might not inherit with Isaac.”⁹ By contrast, the article on Sarah, written by the same editors, states, “The fact that now she [Sarah] had a son of her own augmented her displeasure with Hagar and Ishmael; and Abraham, at her solicitation, sent both away after God had quieted his scruples.”¹⁰ Yet the entry on Ishmael clearly paints this eldest son as the villain: “When Sarah saw Ishmael mocking her son Isaac, his brother, younger by fourteen years, she insisted that Abraham cast out Ishmael and his slave-mother. Abraham reluctantly yielded, having provided them with bread and a bottle of water.”¹¹ Of course, in the entry on Abraham, the patriarch, the one with all the power, comes off without any responsibility at all: “At the appointed time Isaac was born, Abraham being a hundred years old. Soon after,

⁹ [HAGAR - JewishEncyclopedia.com.](https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/10148-hagar)

¹⁰ [SARAH \(SARAI\) - JewishEncyclopedia.com.](https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/10148-sarah)

¹¹ [ISHMAEL - JewishEncyclopedia.com.](https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/10148-ishmael)

Ishmael, Hagar's son, was seen "mocking" Isaac by Sarah, and at her solicitation he and his mother were banished."¹²

To this day, scholars argue about whether Sarah or Ishmael are to blame when in the end, the blame lies with Abraham. Abraham holds all the power. After all, Sarah has to ask Abraham to cast out Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham can tell her "no" and she can pout all day but there is nothing she can do about it. As a matter of fact, if she causes too much fuss, he can demote her to subordinate wife or even banish her from the clan if he chooses. He is the master of the clan and his word is law. He holds the power of life and death over every member of his clan. After all, Sarah has done her job; she has given birth to Isaac and nursed him through the perils of infancy. He doesn't really need her anymore, does he?

But the Biblical authors (and subsequent scholars and commentators, generally male ones) don't want us realizing this fact. Just like all the powers that be, the people in power would rather that the people who don't have much power point fingers at each other or at other oppressed people rather than look up and point their fingers at them.

Additionally, we should note that Abraham is so reluctant and generous and caring to his son Ishmael and to his concubine Hagar that he sends them out into the heat and the desert with one skinful of water and some bread (Genesis 21:14). Thanks, Dad! Can you imagine being a young teen and having your dad kick you and your mom out

¹² [ABRAHAM - JewishEncyclopedia.com](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com).

of the house into the wilderness to actually starve and die of thirst? I know people whose parents actually attacked them or threw weapons at them. They never recovered fully from such events.

Thankfully for Ishmael and Hagar, Yahweh again champions them and, through an angel, provides water when they became desperate (Genesis 21:14-19). Hagar becomes Ishmael's patriarch and protector while God watches over them both.

In the meantime, Isaac is not safe from his awful father. When Isaac is about the age Ishmael was when Abraham nearly killed him, God approaches Abraham. Genesis 22:1 tells us that God asks Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. The Hebrew word used here to describe what God is doing is "*nisah*," a word that in this context means "give experience to, train"¹³ rather than "to test" which is how our Bibles translate the word. However, what experience is God giving Abraham here? This indeed is the question.

Many interpreters conclude that this passage describes God teaching Abraham that God never wants child sacrifice (despite the fact that later Israelite and Judahite kings will conduct that vile practice and despite the fact that Christian interpreters will see this story in light of the death of Jesus, a discussion which is beyond the scope of this session).

Other interpreters see this passage as a call to obey the commands of God no matter how terrifying they seem. Kierkegaard

¹³ William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament based on the Lexical Work of L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner* (Leiden, the Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1988) p. 239; HALOT, vol. 1, p., 702.

famously supported Abraham by writing an essay defending the patriarch by arguing that devotion to God should come before every social construct, including the societal notion of parent/child relationships.¹⁴ Other commentators support such a position because of the belief that absolute devotion to God can encompass any and all acts.¹⁵ This understanding is appalling as this belief has clearly led to atrocities such as the Crusades, the torture and murder of women and men accused of “witchcraft,” the persecution of people for their sexuality and sexual identities as well as justifications for slavery, banning of interracial marriages, the beating and rape of wives, child abuse and other forms of oppression and terrorism. Both justifications of Abraham’s silence are flawed. While Kierkegaard is partially correct in that God’s laws and norms surpass human laws and norms, the interpretation of what God wants for us stops when a human interprets God’s will as something that actively oppresses, harms or kills another living human, which is always against the will of God, since the ultimate aim of God is human salvation, including salvation from oppression and death. While a person can place God above their family by, for example, turning in their spouse or child or family member for committing a crime, a person cannot use God as an excuse to become a vigilante and execute their family member in the name of God. Again, this passage in *absolutely no way* means blind obedience to what a human thinks God wants, especially if that

¹⁴ [Kierkegaard’s Abraham \(bibleodyssey.org\)](http://bibleodyssey.org).

¹⁵ [Why did God command Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? | GotQuestions.org](http://GotQuestions.org)

human thinks God wants them to oppress, harm or kill another living human being.

The best interpretation is that God wants Abraham to say “no.” Several commentators agree, for various reasons.¹⁶ The most compelling reason is that this event permits Abraham to experience first-hand the suffering he has already imposed upon his family. He advocated for Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18:20-32. When he pimped out Sarai to Pharaoh (and later Abimelech), he didn’t have to personally witness her suffering. He left the pregnant Hagar to be afflicted by Sarai, thereby keeping his robes clean. He sent his son Ishmael and his concubine Hagar into the wilderness to die of thirst but he didn’t have to watch it. Now, God wants him to experience first-hand the suffering he has inflicted so casually upon his family. That is the experience, the “training” God wants him to have. He wants Abraham to argue with him at the very start, to change his mind along the path, to falter at the very last moment while looking into his terrified, bewildered son’s eyes. Indeed, if we return to Genesis 18:17-19, God decides to discuss the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah with Abraham precisely because God wants Abraham to teach his descendants about the ways of God. Abraham’s debate with God, his defense of the righteous in the two cities proves his worthiness in this role. But here, in this final experience, Abraham fails massively. He remains ruthless to the end. Once again, God has to intervene, to be the champion of the victim, because despite the numerous times

¹⁶ See the wonderful argument in [TheakedatYitzchak-AbrahamandtheSacrificeofIsaac--AModernInterpretationofanAncientStoryAUGUSTINEMMENSAH.pdf](#)

God has stepped in to protect one or more of Abraham's relatives from Abraham's abuse, Abraham never learns his lesson.

Throughout the life of Isaac, we see the post-traumatic stress of this event played out in his life. Several times, he digs wells and when outsiders claim the well for themselves, he avoids a confrontation and simply abandons his well and moves along or makes treaties to his own detriment (Genesis 26:12-31). Such conflict-avoidance is a hallmark sign of someone who has experienced childhood trauma.¹⁷ Sadly, this type of PTSD also affected Isaac's parenting ability (how could it not? After all, dad did try to kill him!).

We are told from the very birth of fraternal twins Esau and Jacob that their parents played favorites. Isaac favored the outdoorsman Esau and Rebekah favored the homebody Jacob. Nevertheless, one fact about their sons is abundantly clear to both parents: Esau, the firstborn and therefore the next patriarch, is completely unsuitable for the role. Genesis 25:29-34 describes how casually Esau treats his sacred birthright. One day, the elder brother returns from a hard days hunting, famished. Jacob has been cooking (something that reveals the Bible supports all men learning to cook!) and Esau demands some. Jacob agrees provided Esau swears he will give Jacob his birthright (the role of patriarch and his double share of Isaac's property upon his death). Esau swears (although clearly this oath isn't actually binding). The point of this exchange is stated in Genesis 25:34: "Esau cared little for his birthright." Being the eldest in ancient Israel was not simply "birth order" but a sacred duty granting rights

¹⁷ [Why Trauma Might Make You Avoid Conflict \(themighty.com\)](http://themighty.com).

and responsibilities. The eldest would inherit property and power, but also would be responsible for keeping the family alive and well, defend them from violent enemies as well as from drought and famine, keep them in the ways of God and provide them with suitable spouses. A person whom God had chosen for this role (as the Israelites believed) needed to regard their birthright with reverence. Esau clearly did not.

Additionally, Esau does not follow the time-honored traditions of marrying within the clan, permitting his parents to arrange his marriage nor even seeking their blessing upon his marriage. Rather, “when Esau was forty years old, he married Judith, daughter of Beerli the Hittite and Basemath, daughter of Elon the Hivite. But they became a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebekah” (Genesis 26:34-35). So, not only does Esau completely disregard all clan traditions, he marries women who do not respect his parents. Nothing about his marriages bode well for a future patriarch in the eyes of his parents.

But if we remember, Isaac has been traumatized into conflict avoidance and Esau is his favorite child. He in no way can tell his beloved son to his face that he’s a lousy candidate for patriarch and therefore, he’s out and his younger twin is in. The very thought would probably make Isaac flash back to his own father standing over him with a butcher knife.

Instead, Isaac’s beloved wife Rebekah concocts a ridiculous ploy to accomplish the task and take the heat off of Isaac (Genesis 27:1-40). And, if we read the text carefully, we can see that Isaac is in on it. First, Isaac waits until he can’t see very well before setting the

plan into motion. Then, he initiates the plan, asking Esau to leave the premises, go hunting for something specific so that he can return and make the one dish Esau apparently knows how to prepare and then Isaac will give him “the blessing of my soul,” apparently a final blessing (such as a deathbed blessing). Rebekah listens in and moves on with stage two. She prods Jacob into going along with the “deception” of Isaac.

Jacob sounds like Jacob but because he feels and smells like a hairy animal it must be Esau? That’s plausible. Somehow, lamb stew is substituted for game stew – and a half-blind man can’t tell the difference? Really? How spicy is this dish? How gamey is this lamb? And most improbable of all, when the real Esau shows up, why on earth didn’t Isaac denounce Jacob, revoke the blessing he had given him and bestow it upon Esau? Because he never wanted to give Esau the patriarchal blessing in the first place. It was all a ruse he had agreed to beforehand. Unfortunately, by avoiding the blame, he created violent enmity between his sons and his wife never saw her beloved Jacob again. (And millennia of interpreters blamed – and still blame – Rebekah for being “deceptive” to him and to Esau).

Jacob clearly learned his parenting skills from mom and dad. He played favorites which also created violent enmity between his sons (something we will discuss in detail next week).

A father after Abraham’s own heart is the judge Jephthah. He appears in Judges 11. Although he repeatedly is victorious in battle, he idiotically makes a vow to God regarding the outcome of his upcoming war with the Ammonites. He states that if he is victorious

over them, “whosoever/whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites shall belong to YHWH. I shall offer him up as a burnt offering” (Judges 11:30-31). Seriously, what could go wrong?

Of course he defeats the Ammonites soundly. And of course his only child, an unnamed daughter, comes out of his tent to greet him, dancing and singing and playing a tambourine to celebrate his victory. She is too young to have married or had children, so both he and his name will die out with her (as will she and her name, clearly, since the Biblical authors never saw fit to name her). She merely asks for two months to mourn the fact that she will have no immortality (the Bible refers to it as “mourning her virginity” which clearly ends up being misinterpreted!). Sadly, no angel comes to save her. However, many commentators do interpret this passage as meaning she is dedicated to a life of perpetual virginity in service to God rather than to death (a sort of permanent nazirite status), which is certainly preferable to execution.¹⁸

In this vein, we have Hannah. She is another in a long line of Biblical infertile women desperate for children. She, too, bargains with God, vowing at the shrine at Shiloh, “O YHWH of hosts, if you will look upon the suffering of your maidservant and will remember me and not forget your maidservant, and if you grant your maidservant a son, I will dedicate him to YHWH for all the days of his life; and no razor shall ever touch his head” (1 Samuel 1:11). Apparently, she only cared about birthing a son rather than actually

¹⁸ [Did Jephthah Actually Kill his Daughter? - TheTorah.com](http://TheTorah.com)

raising one. (Sounds weirdly familiar, doesn't it?). While Hannah is always held up as an example of faith and trust in God, imagine being Samuel. He had no choice in his life, he was raised by strangers and in effect, was given away by a mother who only wanted him as a prize to prove her womb worked. Thanks, Mom!

King David was a terrible parent as well. When his eldest son and heir, Amnon, rapes his half-sister Tamar, David does...nothing. The Bible tells us that he is very angry but he "did not...spark the resentment of his son Amnon, whom he favored because he was his firstborn" (2 Samuel 13:21). Nor does David do anything to support his traumatized daughter. He leaves her in the hands of her full brother Absalom for care and comfort. We shall see in future sessions where that indifference gets David.

The prophets seemed to be awful parents as well. Both Eli and Samuel had sons whose behavior was reprehensible. Eli, the priest of YHWH's sacred shrine at Shiloh, had sons who slept with women by the sacred tent of meeting (where God spoke to the priests) and took the best of the sacrifices for themselves when the best should be offered to God (1 Samuel 2:22;29). They were both killed in a battle with the Philistines, thus ending Eli's line, immortality and priesthood (1 Samuel 4:11). Samuel's sons were no better; they "sought illicit gain and accepted bribes, perverting justice" (1 Samuel 8:3). Interestingly, the very next thing that happens is that the elders demand a king. This demand seems to be the direct consequence of the immoral behavior of Samuel's sons. Since the people fear they

can no longer trust in the judgement of the priests and prophets, the demand a civil authority to protect them.

This final example reveals an important truth. Individuals are affected by their lives and these individuals can become powerful people who affect the lives of everyone around them. Samuel was an unloved, unwanted child who become inordinately powerful. However, like so many “great” people, especially those who were traumatized as children, he had no ability to raise a family. However, his inability to raise children deeply affected the politics of his time: it led to the calls for a complete change of the governing system of his people. Those repercussions were and have been profound.

How much have our own political systems, laws and conflicts been influenced by the activities of those who were once traumatized children?

This fact teaches us to be very wary of holding any leader so high in our esteem. While we might feel they are accomplishing great deeds, that they are bringing great good to the world, we can never forget that everyone and everyone is human, with human flaws and traumas. Because of this truth, we must be very, very careful when following or supporting any politician, commentator, even religious leader or teacher (even me!). We must take in multiple sources of evidence, weigh this evidence thoughtfully and prayerfully and make mature, fully informed decisions. No one human has all the truth. God alone possesses the truth. We are disciples of God, of Jesus and of the Holy Spirit. Let the Trinity lead us to salvation.