

HAGAR: THE BONDWOMAN WHO WAS CAST OUT

By LAVONNE J. MCCLISH

INTRODUCTION

And the child grew, and was weaned: and Abraham made a great feast the same day that Isaac was weaned. And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking. Wherefore she said unto Abraham, cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac. And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son. And God said unto Abraham, let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman; in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called. And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is thy seed (Gen. 21:8–13).¹

God first promised in Genesis 12:1–3 that He would make a great nation of Abram. Abram's wife Sarai (also his half-sister, 20:12) was a beautiful woman (an attribute that at times brought him worry as well as joy—12:10–20; 20:1–18), but she was barren. Abram believed God's promise, but he could not help being concerned about how it might be fulfilled, since both he and Sarai were aging. He thought perhaps his steward, Eliezer, was to be his heir (15:1–3). But Jehovah renewed His pledge that Abram's own seed would be his heir (vv. 4–6), and at that time made a covenant with Abram concerning his descendants and his possessions (land). A covenant can be defined as "a binding agreement." However, in the case of covenants between God and men, men are bound by the covenant whether or not they agree! They can disobey, but that does not free them from the obligations of the covenant.

WHY HAGAR WAS CAST OUT

The real trouble began with the events recorded in chapter 16. Sarai decided that, since the Lord had “restrained her” from having children, she needed to help Him out and move the proceedings along. Having an Egyptian maid, Hagar, Sarai concocted the plan to give her to Abram, and to substitute Hagar’s child for the one God had not given to Sarai (since Hagar was a slave, any children born to her would belong to her master and/or mistress). Abram agreed to Sarai’s idea, and took Hagar as a second, albeit subordinate, wife. Surely enough, Hagar conceived. But when she saw that she could give Abram children, whereas her mistress Sarai could not, she despised Sarai.

Stung with jealousy and anger, Sarai ran to Abram and tried to blame him for the whole unfortunate development. She said, “My wrong be upon thee! I have given my maid into thy bosom, and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes! The Lord judge between me and thee” (Gen. 16:5). In other words, look what I get for doing a good deed, an unselfish act! (If Sarai had only been able to have faith enough to wait for God’s promise to be fulfilled in His time and in His way, none of these things would have happened. And therein is a lesson for all of us. A little patience and a little faith would go a long way toward making our lives better.)

Poor Abram (who did not demonstrate the greatest wisdom and leadership in going along with Sarai’s plan, either) authorized Sarai to do whatever she wished with Hagar (who was, after all, Sarai’s property), whereupon Sarai “dealt hardly with her,” and “she fled from her face” (v. 6b). (Before we judge Sarai too harshly for her treatment of her maid, let us remember that “despising” a mistress was not acceptable behavior for a servant—especially a bondservant. For that matter, try “despising” your employer

today and see where it gets you! You will find yourself cast out of your office and into the unemployment line.) The “angel of the Lord” found Hagar by a fountain in the wilderness on the way to Shur and sent her back to submit herself to Sarai (which would seem to indicate that Hagar’s “despising” and then “fleeing” was wrong). Because Hagar’s child was Abram’s, the angel promised her that her son Ishmael (“God hears,” Gen. 16:11) would, as would the child promised to Abram and Sarai, be the father of a great nation. He would be a wild man and a contentious man (v. 12). Abram was eighty-six years old when Ishmael was born, and still there was no child of promise.

The Promise Repeated—In God’s Own Time

God spoke again to Abram when he was ninety-nine years old, repeating the promise and setting the covenant (of which circumcision was the token—man’s part of the agreement) into place (Gen. 17:10–11). At this time God changed Abram’s name to “Abraham”—“father of many nations.” Sarai became “Sarah,” meaning “princess.” Abraham asked that the promise might be fulfilled through Ishmael (v. 18), but God refused. He would bless Ishmael (for Abraham’s sake), but the true heir was to be born of Sarah, the free woman. Isaac (“laughter”) was born when Abraham was one hundred years old (21:1–5) and Sarah was ninety (17:17; 21:5).

When Isaac was weaned, Abraham made a great feast. We cannot say positively how old Isaac was when he was weaned, but we can be fairly certain that children in that time were not weaned nearly as early as they are now in this age of refrigerated, pasteurized, homogenized, fortified milk and baby formula, not to mention a large array of baby foods. Many say the average weaning age was at least three, and possibly even older. Ishmael was thirteen years old when he was circumcised (17:25), and

therefore must have been fourteen when Isaac was born (v. 21). If this was the case, Ishmael was probably at least seventeen years old—not a small child—when the feast was held to mark or celebrate Isaac’s weaning, a rite of passage.

During the feast Sarah saw Ishmael mocking **her** son Isaac. It seems not unlikely that there was some resentment and jealousy in Ishmael over being supplanted as Abraham’s only son. Galatians 4:29 tells us that Ishmael “persecuted” Isaac; this “mocking,” therefore, was not mere playful teasing. (Paul tells us that, as Ishmael persecuted Isaac, so it was with the early Christians: The fleshly Israelites continued to persecute spiritual Israel. We might also say that Ishmael’s physical descendants, the Arabs, are still persecuting Isaac’s physical descendants, the Jews [or “Israelis,” as they prefer to be called]. But the question of who is persecuting whom today could be a debatable proposition! At any rate, they are still fighting.)

As we might imagine, Sarah was enraged, and demanded that Abraham cast out the bondwoman, Hagar, and her son, Ishmael (Gen. 21:10), for “the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son Isaac.” Naturally, Abraham was reluctant to do such a thing; we have no indication of his feelings (or the lack thereof) for Hagar, but he did love her son Ishmael. We might be surprised that God would sanction, let alone encourage, such a seemingly cruel and harsh act (especially since Sarah was ultimately responsible for the very existence of Ishmael), but He told Abraham, “in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called” (v. 12). The truth is that what Sarah wanted to do was God’s plan all along.

THE SON OF THE BONDWOMAN SEPARATED FROM THE SON OF THE FREEWOMAN

Abraham gave Hagar bread and a bottle of water and sent her and Ishmael away. She wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba (“well of the oath,” Gen. 21:22–31, where Abraham and Abimelech swore to each other that Abraham had indeed dug this well, and it belonged to him) until the water in her bottle was all gone. So that she would not have to see her child die, she laid him under some shrubs. Then she went some distance (“about a bowshot”) from him, sat down, and began to wail. God’s angel called to her, asking her a somewhat rhetorical question: “What aileth thee?”

Reassuring her that God had heard Ishmael’s cries, he repeated the promise that God would make of Ishmael a great nation. Then God opened her eyes that she might see a well nearby. She hastened to fill her bottle and give Ishmael a drink, reviving him. “And God was with the lad; and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer” (21:20). Hagar took an Egyptian wife for him (v. 21), and he became the father of twelve sons (25:12–16).

God’s separation of Ishmael (the son of Abraham and Hagar, the bondwoman, but **not** the promised child) from Isaac (the child of the promise of God to Abraham through Sarah, the free woman) was not an indication that he did not love Ishmael or that an innocent child was being punished for the circumstances of his birth. God saw to it that Ishmael and his mother (who, as a slave, had little control over the events that transpired) were cared for and that Ishmael became the father of a great nation. The separation of Ishmael from Isaac was carried out because the promise (Gen. 22:17–18), that in Abraham’s seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed, was to be through

Isaac and **his** son, Jacob (Israel, the father of the twelve tribes). Since Ishmael was Abraham's firstborn, there might have been even more conflict later on over which son was the rightful heir. The genealogical line had to be kept pure until the birth of the Messiah.

Probably for a similar reason, Abraham sent the sons of Keturah (whom he married after Sarah's death) and those of other concubines, away from Isaac (25:1–6). He acknowledged them as his children, and he gave them gifts; but he gave Isaac “all that he had.”

THE ALLEGORY

Tell me, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law? For it is written, Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the Mount Sinai, which gendereth to [ASV “bearing children unto”] bondage, which is Agar. For this Agar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. For it is written, rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband. Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the spirit, even so it is now. Nevertheless, what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the free woman. So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free (Gal. 4:21–31).

An allegory, according to Webster, is “A story in which people, things, and happenings have another meaning, often morally instructive, as in a fable” and also “the presenting of ideas by means of such stories.” Paul in his letter to the Galatian churches

does use people, things, and happenings to instruct concerning or to illustrate other things. However, let us never forget that these are **real, literal** people, places, events, and things, and that this particular allegory is inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is **not** a fable. The word translated as “allegory” comes from the Greek word, *allegoroumena*, from *allegoreo*. The word is made up of two words: *allos*, “other,” and *agoreuo*, “to speak in a place of assembly (*agora*, the market-place).” It came to signify “to speak, not according to the primary sense of the word, but so that the facts stated are applied to illustrate principles.”²

Now let us turn our attention to the Holy Spirit’s use of these Old Testament events and people to illustrate a vital lesson concerning the covenants, the laws, and the purposes of each. “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope” (Rom. 15:4). The Galatian saints, predominantly Gentiles, were going beyond **learning** from the old covenant; they were succumbing to the persuasive teaching, influence, and even pressure of the Judaizing teachers, who were telling them they could not be Christians without keeping the law of Moses (or at least without keeping the rite of circumcision).

We might have difficulty in understanding God’s words and actions in dealing with Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Hagar, and Ishmael, if we did not have Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Our understanding of the Old Testament is made clearer by our understanding of the New, and vice versa. If we do not have a clear conception of the differences and similarities between the Old and the New Testaments (or covenants), their purposes, their participants, and their duration, and if we do not know how and

when to apply them, we are hopelessly adrift in trying to make sense out of either one. Therein lies the root of much of the free-wheeling “religion” of our time.

Paul explained that, as Hagar’s children were in bondage, so the Jews were in bondage under the law. But when the time was right, God sent forth His Son, born under the law and born of a woman, to redeem (buy back, make free) those that were under the law of Moses so that they could be adopted as children of God (Gal. 4:1–5). But the Gentiles were **never** under the law of Moses! It was given exclusively to the Jews. We are reminded of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15, where some of the Pharisees in the church were trying to bring the Gentile Christians into submission to the Jewish law, or a part thereof (vv. 1–31). The Jews, even though they had been steeped in the law for generation after generation, were never able to keep it (v. 10). Yet they wanted to bind it on the Gentiles. Peter says here that their (Gentiles **and** Jews) hearts were purified by **faith**—not the **law**—and that they would be saved by the grace of God (vv. 9, 11).

Paul used the Jews’ own law as a beginning place to instruct the Galatians concerning the covenant of Christ (in a similar way Philip “began at the same scripture [Isa. 53:7–8] and preached unto him [the Ethiopian] Jesus,” Acts 8:35). As Ishmael was “added” while Abraham and Sarah were waiting for the coming of the child of promise, so the law of Moses was added (Gal. 3:19), because of transgression, until the promised Seed of Abraham should come (as v. 16 stresses, Abraham was not promised “seeds,” but “seed”: Jesus Christ. Paul’s argument depends on that one letter “s,” on whether the word is plural or singular). The law, in fact, was added 430 years **after** the promise was made to Abraham! He received the promise in faith, even before he was

circumcised. The inheritance promised to Abraham could not have been by the law! Was the law bad, then? Paul says it was not, nor was it against the promises of God. God gave the law for a purpose, and it fulfilled that purpose. If there had been a law which could have given life, then righteousness would have been by that law (v. 21).

In Galatians 5, Paul continues his discussion and contrast of the covenants. He urges his readers to stand firm in their liberty in Christ, and not to become entangled again with the “yoke of bondage.” Circumcision was neither good nor bad, in and of itself. But binding it as a part of the covenant of Christ would not benefit the Galatians in any way. Furthermore, if they insisted on circumcision as a rite of Christianity, then they would be debtors to keep the **whole** law. They would be “fallen from grace” (vv. 1–4). They were called to liberty (v. 13). If they were led by the Spirit, then they could not be under the law (v. 18). Paul accused the Judaizing teachers in the Galatian Church of urging circumcision upon the Gentiles so that they (Jewish Christians) would escape persecution for the cross of Christ (6:12). They themselves, Jews, did not keep the law! They only wanted the Gentiles to be circumcised so that it might bring **them** honor and glory (and perhaps even shield them from wrath) in the eyes of the Jewish rulers (v. 13). “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision availeth any thing, but a new creature” (v. 15).

To the Ephesian Christians Paul wrote:

Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called uncircumcision by that which is called the circumcision in the flesh made by hands; that at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: but now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made

nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us: having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making; and that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby (2:11–16).

The Ephesian Christians were mostly Gentiles, and thus outside of the covenant of God with Abraham, never having been subject to the law of Moses. But Christ brought Jew and Gentile together. He did away with that old law given through Moses and those ordinances that no mere human being could keep perfectly. He, by His death, broke down that dividing wall, and made of the two warring factions one new man; by standing between us and God, He reconciled all of us to God.

Even in Philippi, otherwise relatively free from problems, the Judaizing teachers were busy. Paul had to warn the church there, “Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the concision. For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice, and have no confidence in the flesh” (3:2–3). Paul could have held his own in any contest with these Jews over who was (or at least had been) the most devout Jew and the most valiant defender of the law (vv. 4–7). But he knew that the righteousness of the law was useless. Only faith in Christ would save him and them (v. 9).

When the Holy Spirit related the events in Genesis concerning Hagar and her son Ishmael, Sarah and her son Isaac, and Abraham, God long since had His plan for redemption worked out and in place, whereby the Messiah would come and bring Jew and Gentile together in His body. This plan was in place even before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:2–3; I Pet. 1:18–20). Paul also wrote to the Ephesians concerning the sacrifices he had made for them. They were Gentiles,

but the “mystery of Christ” (that which had been hidden but now is made plain) had been revealed to the apostles, making the Gentiles equal to and “fellow-heirs” with the Jews. They were given the same opportunities as were the Jews to inherit the promise in Christ (3:4–6). All of these things were “according to the eternal purpose which he [God] purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord” (v. 11). Every word of God is of vital importance. It can almost be said that every chapter in the Old Testament points in some way toward the coming of Christ to gather all into His kingdom, the church. We must not think of these accounts, such as that of Abraham, his wives, and his children, as merely historical accounts (which they certainly were) or even as just “stories.”

Cometh this blessedness then upon the circumcision only, or upon the uncircumcision also? For we say that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness. How was it then reckoned? When he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision. And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith, which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised, that righteousness might be imputed [reckoned] unto them also: and the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised. For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if they which are of the law be heirs, faith is made void, and the promises made of none effect (Rom. 4:9–14).

Ishmael was born “after the flesh,” that is, from the normal, natural union of Abraham and Hagar. But Isaac’s birth was **not** natural and normal. Not only was Sarah

well past the age of childbearing, but she had always been barren. Had God not promised and then fulfilled His promise, Isaac would never have been born, and there would have been no Jewish race and no chosen people. Hagar and Sarah represent the two covenants: Hagar is the covenant given through Moses on Mount Sinai. It was given to the Jews, who were never able to keep it perfectly. If they offended in **one point**, they were guilty of breaking the entire law (Jas. 2:10–11). Sarah, on the other hand, is the new covenant which came through Christ, and brings freedom from sin through His “perfect law of liberty” (1:25). We are not free from **any and all** law in Christ, but His “yoke is easy” and his “burden is light” (Matt. 11:30), compared to the unbearable yoke of the law (Acts 15:10).

The law served its purpose; it did exactly what God intended for it to do:

But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law **was our schoolmaster** [tutor, ASV], to bring us unto Christ. But after that faith is come, **we are no longer under a schoolmaster**. For ye are all the children of god by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. **There is neither Jew nor Greek**, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. **And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise** (Gal. 3:23–29, emph. LJM).

Paul used the marriage relationship (one of many such illustrations in his epistles) to demonstrate the fact that the old covenant was (and is) no longer in effect. A married woman was (and is) bound to her husband as long as he lived. If she married another man, she would be called an adulteress. But when her husband died, then she would be free from that covenant, and free to marry another man. In the same way, the Jews were “dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another,

even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God. ... But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter” (Rom. 7:4–6, emph. LJM). Paul grieved for his fellow Jews who rejected their Messiah and clung to that old law which was decayed and taken out of the way. His heart’s desire for them was that they might be saved (Rom. 10:1).

Who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promise. ... for they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, in Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, they which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted for the seed. For this is the word of promise, at this time will I come, and Sarah shall have a son (Rom. 9:2–10).

“And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, there shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: for this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins” (Rom. 11:26–27). “For this Agar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all” (Gal. 4:25–26). God did establish the old covenant and the physical Jewish kingdom to prepare the way for the new covenant and the spiritual kingdom of Christ. He did set the Jews apart to provide a pure blood-line in anticipation of the Christ’s birth of a Jewish mother. But it was extremely difficult for the Jews to accept the fact that the old law and covenant, by which they alone were God’s chosen people, was not permanent. It was **designed** to be temporary.

Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. ... and you are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power: in whom also ye are circumcised with the **circumcision made without hands**, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the **circumcision of Christ**. ... and you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; **blotting out the handwriting of ordinances** that was against us, which was contrary to us, and **took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross** ... let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy-day, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: which are a **shadow of things to come**; but the body is of Christ ... wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, (touch not, taste not, handle not; **which all are to perish with the using**;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? (Col. 2:8–22, emph. LJM).

“God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the **fathers** by the **prophets**, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his **Son**, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds” (Heb. 1:1–2, emph. LJM). Thus begins the Hebrews epistle, so essential in its entirety to our comprehension of the two covenants. The author of the letter to the Hebrew Christians devotes a large portion of his epistle to a discussion and comparison of the Levitical priesthood with the priesthood of Christ. Melchisedec (Gen. 14) serves as a type of Christ in that neither had the required ancestry to be Levitical priests. Jesus was “made an high priest forever after the order of Melchisedec” (Heb. 6:20). Melchisedec was greater than Levi, the father of the tribe of priests, as indicated by the fact that Levi—figuratively in the loins of his father Abraham—paid tithes to Melchisedec. Since it is without question that the less is blessed by the better, and since Melchisedec blessed Abraham, it follows that Melchisedec was greater than Abraham and hence greater than Levi (vv. 7–10).

If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood and the law, then what need was there for another priest to arise, after the order of Melchisedec and **not** after the order of Aaron (Heb. 7:11)? “For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change in the law” (v. 12). Our Lord was of the tribe of Judah, and nothing had been said by Moses about priests coming from Judah.

For there is verily a **disannulling of the commandment going before** for the weakness and unprofitableness thereof. For the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did; by the which we draw nigh unto God. ... by so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament. And they truly were many priests, because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death: but this man, because he continueth ever, hath an **unchangeable priesthood**. Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them. For such an high priest became us, who is holy, harmless [guileless, ASV], undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens; who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people's: for this he did once, when he offered up himself. For the law maketh men high priests which have infirmity; but the word of the oath, which was since the law, maketh the [appointeth a, ASV] son, who is consecrated for evermore (Heb. 7:18–28, emph. LJM).

For every high priest is ordained to offer gifts and sacrifices: wherefore it is of necessity that this man have somewhat also to offer. For if he were on earth, **he should not be a priest**, seeing that there are priests that offer gifts according to the law: who serve unto the **example and shadow of heavenly things**, as Moses was admonished of god when he was about to make the tabernacle: for see, saith he, that thou make all things according to the pattern shewed to thee in the mount. But now **hath he obtained a more excellent ministry**, by how much also he is the **mediator of a better covenant**, which was established upon better promises. For **if that first covenant had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second**. For finding fault with them, he saith, behold, the days come, saith the lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah ... in that he saith, a new covenant, he hath made the first old. Now

that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away (Heb. 8:3–13, emph. LJM).

In the ninth chapter, verses 1–10, the writer gives a detailed description of the first tabernacle with all of its parts and its furniture. He reminds his readers that the priests regularly went into the first section of the tabernacle to perform their services to God. But into the second division, the Holy of Holies, **only** the high priest was allowed to go, and then only once a year; furthermore, he could enter only with blood for atonement. He first had to make atonement for his **own** sins, and only then could he make atonement for the sins of all the people. By this it was signified that the way into the spiritual “Most Holy Place” had not yet been shown, as long as the first tabernacle was in place. The old tabernacle was only a figure of the new. The old was temporary, but the new will stand forever. The sacrifices and atonements made by the priests could never make the worshipers perfect, but were imposed until the “time of reformation” or “the time of setting things right.”³

But Christ has become our High Priest of a perfect tabernacle, not made with hands. He does not take the blood of bulls and goats to make atonement for us as did Aaron and his descendants, but He has once and for all time taken His own blood and redeemed us from our bondage in sin (Heb. 9:11–12). “And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament [covenant], that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance” (v. 15). The blood of the perfect Lamb of God goes all the way back to the law—in fact, all the way back to the beginning—to redeem

and forgive those who were faithful to that old covenant, as well as all of us who have lived **since** His death!

For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us. Nor yet that he should offer himself often, as the high priest enters into the holy place every year with blood of others; for then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world [ages] hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself (Heb. 9:24–26).

The discourse continues with the explanations and contrasts (Heb. 10:1–4). The law was only a shadow of the coming of Christ with His new covenant. Those sacrifices could never truly forgive sins, nor could they make anyone perfect. The sins of those worshipers were remembered each and every year, and therefore atonement had to be made year after year. I remember a long time ago hearing an illustration of this yearly remembering of sins. It was compared to a promissory note at the bank. The loan comes due every year, and if one cannot pay it off (which often happened in the days of my youth!), he can pay the interest on the note and renew it for another year. In a similar way, the “interest,” or penalty, for the Israelites’ sins was due every year. The high priest’s atonement was merely the payment of the interest, until Christ should come to pay their entire debt and redeem them. At that time their sins were washed away forever, so that they stood free from sin and justified before God. “He taketh away the first, that he may establish the second” (v. 9).

The Hebrews writer then quotes a prophecy from Jeremiah 31:31–33, confirming the fact that Christ has come and set in place the new covenant, taking away the old. Under this new covenant, symbolized by Sarah the free woman, our sins are removed,

never to be remembered again. Through the blood of Jesus, we, as well as the faithful Jews under the old covenant, can enter through the veil into the holiest place (10:19–21). After giving a glowing account of the faith of many of the heroes and heroines of the Old Testament in the first part of chapter 11, the writer pauses to give a detailed commentary on Abraham and Sarah:

By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: for he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God. Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised. Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable. These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city. By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, that in Isaac shall thy seed be called (Heb. 11:8–18).

Abraham knew that the land on which he walked and on which he pitched his tent was not his permanent home. He was looking forward to his **new** home and the **new** covenant. He did not always understand God's words or His actions, but he obeyed without question, even to the point of offering his only son (in relation to the promises—his son by Sarah, the free woman) Isaac, the child through whom the

promise was supposed to be fulfilled. He did not see with his physical eyes, in his lifetime on earth, much of the promise fulfilled. He never owned any land that we know of, except for the cave of Machpelah where he buried Sarah (Gen. 23:3–20). He was able to secure a wife for Isaac from his own kindred (24:1–67), but he did not live to see Isaac’s children.

Paul wrote to the church at Rome:

Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God [ASV, brought under the judgment of God]. Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: for all have sinned, and come [fall] short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past [ASV, because of the passing over of the sins done aforetime], through the forbearance of God (Rom. 3:19–25).

Paul commanded Timothy, “Study to shew thyself approved before God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). The American Standard translation is likely better here, at least according to our modern usage of the English language. *Study* is replaced with *give diligence*, and *rightly dividing* with *handling aright*. I can remember many times hearing sermons and lessons on this passage, with emphasis on study (give diligence would certainly include study) and on rightly dividing the word, referring specifically to the proper division (literally, “cutting,”) ⁴ and separation between the Old and the New Testaments, which is definitely

a Scriptural idea. Handling aright would have essentially the same meaning, but is possibly a broader term than rightly dividing. Many, many of the errors of denominationalism came into being and are yet defended because of a failure to make this distinction. This same failure is now wreaking havoc in the church of the Lord. So many people “study” the Bible by the “hunt and peck” system, or the lack of a system—at random. Wherever the pages fall open, they read and try to make some application. They lack depth of knowledge and understanding. Some of them might be said to use the Bible as a fortune cookie: Wherever it falls open and whatever they first see, they read, and that is their “fortune” for the day!

Conclusion

This allegory of the two women and their sons (together with its companion account in Genesis) is almost like a summary of all that the Bible—Old and New Testaments—teaches concerning the two covenants. A comprehension of this lesson will give us a firm grasp of the overall theme of God’s message to us. “For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). In Jesus’ prayer of John 17, He said He had finished the work—that of teaching and training and preparing the apostles to set in motion the new covenant after the old one was nailed to the cross—which the Father gave Him to do. “When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost” (19:30, emph. LJM). If we attempt to find authority from the Old Testament for worship or practice, we make Christ’s death of no benefit to us. We become children of Hagar the bondwoman. It is that serious.

Endnotes

-
- ¹ All Scripture quotations are from the King James Version unless otherwise indicated.
- ² W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H Revell Co., 1966), p. 47.
- ³ George Ricker Berry, *The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. Co., 1958), p. 572.
- ⁴ Berry, p. 550.

[Note: I prepared this MS for the Thirty-fifth Annual Memphis School of Preaching Lectureship and delivered it orally to a gathering of ladies on that occasion. Forest Hill Church of Christ, Memphis, Tennessee, hosted the lectureship March 25–29, 2001. The MS was also published in the lectureship book, *The Book of Genesis*, ed. Curtis A. Cates.]