



# Sarah, Hagar, Abraham— Hannah, Peninnah, Elkanah: Case Studies in Conflict

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**I**n the overall Genesis narrative, whether or not Sarah and Abraham have a child matters. Will there be a next generation? Will Yahweh's promises prevail? It all depends on the birth of a child. This is one of several biblical stories of miraculous or unexpected births, through which Yahweh bestows blessing upon God's people, renewing the divine promise and moving the saga of Israel's redemptive role in the world along to a new stage.

So is the story of Hannah and Elkanah. It introduces the life of Samuel, thereby opening the door to David and the messianic era. No baby, no future—at least, not the future now spelled out in the biblical history of salvation.

Both stories present events crucial to the biblical history of the promise, and most commentators have examined them in that light. No doubt, rightly so. At the same time, both are stories of familial conflict and intrigue. True, the families involved have a bigger impact than some on biblical history, but, in the narratives, they are still real families with real tensions, real misunderstandings, and real dangers. What will happen if we examine them in the light of these personal human in-

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teractions, as case studies in family conflict? Can we learn anything of value about conflict resolution? True, both are salvation-history miraculous birth stories, but that designation neither adequately describes their genre nor exhausts their content. Each account has its own unique internal development, worthy of particular consideration, even with regard to issues of family conflict.

No one, I suppose, would claim that these two stories were written for the purpose of providing us with paradigmatic models of conflict and conflict resolution. In fact, no one lives his or her life story in order to become a case study. But, precisely as such a life story is real and reported with candor, it becomes a valuable lens into the realities of human existence and a potential mirror for others to use in their own self-examination. Biblical stories will work as well as modern stories—the more so because they are written with a candor that often surprises the faithful reader. Biblical stories offer the added bonus of naming God as a player, thus bringing a specific theological dimension to a consideration of the meaning of life's events. Using biblical stories as case studies may not match their original intent, but it provides another way to enter into the conversation with the material that is a legitimate goal for all engaged in the study of literature; for those who regard the Bible as the word of God, it can provide pastoral and life-giving insight. It might be a way to engage in “biblical imagination,” the theme of this issue of *Word & World*.

#### SARAH, HAGAR, AND ABRAHAM

The specific conflict stories, revolving around barrenness and birth, are reported in Gen 16:1–16 and 21:8–21.<sup>1</sup> These two episodes, however, need to be understood within the longer and more complex narrative in which they are embedded.

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#### *Scene One: The Birth of Ishmael (Gen 16:1–16)*

The famous question of the Watergate investigators is important here: What did they know and when did they know it? Is the decision to resort to Hagar as a kind of surrogate mother an act of little faith by people who should have known better, a creative plan to ensure the fulfillment of the divine promise, or merely a personal episode in the life of a troubled family, with little or no broader significance? The reader, of course, knows of the growing tension between Yahweh's promise that Abram will be the father of a great nation and the actual events as they unfold. So, the Hagar strategy is, at least, provocative. What will this bring? How is it related to the promise?

<sup>1</sup>Source critics, for good reason, ascribed the Gen 16 account to J and the Gen 21 account to E. The present investigation, however, will consider the narrative in its present form to be a meaningful whole. The reading of the texts throughout this essay is my own. At various places, some commentators will agree; others will disagree.

Abram, to be sure, also knew of the promise. In fact, he had already worried that it might have to be fulfilled through a potentially legal but certainly non-biological heir—a slave born in his household (Gen 15:2–3).<sup>2</sup> In the overall narrative, the events of chapter 16 follow up on that fear. With Abram, the reader learns that not only will a slave not be the bearer of the promise (Gen 15:4) but neither will the son of a slave (16:1–16).

As many recent commentators have pointed out, we have not been told specifically that Sarai knows anything of the promise to Abram. So, a judgment about her lack of faith might be premature. Still, the narrator has set the scene in a way that causes the reader to wonder. Perhaps it is only the modern reader who finds it hard to believe that in the decade of their life together in Palestine Sarai and Abram have never engaged in a little pillow talk about the divine promise. Can an ancient marriage have been *that* different? Even if the answer to that question is yes, the narrator has not overlooked the significance of Sarai. Indeed, her importance seems to grow. When Abram initially departed from Haran, Sarai was not even mentioned in the same verse. She is brought in—along with the other possessions!—only after a reference to Lot and to Abram’s age (12:4–5). However, after the episode in Egypt, where Sarai is endangered by being brought into Pharaoh’s harem (12:10–20), Sarai takes a new place in the itinerary—directly alongside Abram, preceding Lot and the worldly goods (13:1). Both the endangerment story itself and Sarai’s new place in this listing suggest that she matters to the overall story.

This ambiguity between what the reader knows and what the principals know (and indeed whether they really do know what the reader thinks they probably ought to know) produces much of the tension in the narrative. Still, read only within in its own parameters, the story of the birth of Ishmael is naive. Sarai and Abram have no children, so Sarai devises a plan.<sup>3</sup> The results are not altogether negative, though the human failures of all the participants are real.

*A. Hagar’s story.* Hagar is hardly an equal partner in these events. As a slave, she was neither consulted about the plan’s advisability nor asked for her consent. Sarai “took” her and “gave her to her husband.” The modern reader sees a violation of her person, perhaps even a kind of rape. Conception, however, changes the equation. Hagar has proven herself able to conceive, no small matter in the ancient world. Although in that culture the child in her womb can be legally called Sarai’s (16:2), Hagar will remain the biological mother. She will be the baby’s nurse, the one with whom he will initially bond. Despite her legal and social inferiority, Hagar can claim a kind of biological and psychological superiority to Sarai, perhaps even involving something new in her status with Abram, so that she can look

<sup>2</sup>Commentators have long discussed the legal and social background of this text. See, for example, Susan Niditch, “Genesis,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992) 17.

<sup>3</sup>This plan, too, has been the subject of much commentary. Apparently, the moral offense seen by the modern reader would not have been an issue in that day (cf. Gen 30:3, 9).

on her mistress “with contempt.” Whether in the ancient world or the modern one, legal status and emotional status are not always identical.

When push comes to shove, however, Hagar is abandoned by Abram and forced to flee. In the wilderness, she meets the angel of the Lord, bearing what sounds like both good news and bad. The good news is that God will multiply her offspring “that they cannot be counted for multitude.” This statement is, in fact, so reminiscent of the earlier promise to Abram (15:5), that at this point no one (neither the reader nor the principals) can be certain that Ishmael will still not turn out to be the child of promise. That ambiguity heightens the offense committed by Sarai and Abram in expelling Hagar. Reading again in the broader narrative context, they can’t have it both ways: if they knew the promise applied to Sarai, their use of Hagar was an act of little faith; if they did not, their weakness and anger make them willing to throw away the promised child.

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The bad news to Hagar in the wilderness is the call to return to her mistress “and submit to her.” Again, the modern reader hears a demand that she return to victimization and abuse. We would want, instead, to find her a shelter, a safe place where she could deliver her child in peace. But, if we try to put the best construction on the story, what does it have in mind? The first thing, no doubt, would be the physical and material well-being of Hagar and the baby. In fact, there were no shelters for unwed mothers, the wilderness will only bring death, and Hagar’s life will be better back in the household. Second, the story seems to suggest the possibility of reconciliation. In returning, Hagar must give up her own arrogance. But the demands will apply not only to her. There will be genuine give and take. Not only must Hagar “submit” to Sarai, but Sarai must “submit” to whatever personal trauma is involved in living together with the mother of her husband’s child. She must give up her vendetta against Hagar, and Abram will have to find a way to maintain peace in the family. Finally, there still seems here to be a possibility of familial, tribal, even world unity. True, Ishmael “shall be a wild ass of a man...and he shall live at odds with all his kin,” but, for now, at least, it seems that it might be possible for him at least to live with his kin—possible that the family, though troubled, might be kept together. While Hagar is bade to “submit,” she is not called to return to the status quo ante. She, herself, has been given strength and identity, and the situation has promise. She can submit now with a degree of choice and for the sake of a greater good, not because she has no value and no alternatives. One might even say that she is invited to take on an atoning role: achieving, through her submission, the unity of God’s family.

Given this new sense of herself and her role, Hagar becomes a theologian, boldly naming God and what God has done: “You are El-roi,” she says in her amazement. “Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?” (Gen 16:13).

*B. Sarai’s story.* As already stated, we are not sure what Sarai knew or did not know. Putting her in the best light, however, she is merely trying to deal with a problem of significance only to herself and her family. She is without children, but custom provides her a way to remedy that situation, and she goes for it. She seems even pious in the process, twice taking in her mouth the name Yahweh. On second look, though, her theologizing may not be altogether salutary. The second time, the call for the “LORD to judge between” her and Abram (v. 5) is an outburst of anger, claiming a superior righteousness, and enlisting God on her side (cf. 1 Sam 24:12, 15). The first, the assumption that “the LORD has prevented me from having children,” may be an unwarranted assumption. Unlike other stories (for example, 1 Sam 1:5), we never hear this claim from the narrator, only from Sarai. It may or may not be true. It may be that Sarai is too quick to raise the theological stakes. What may be called for, rather than moving the issues into God’s realm, is more of an attempt to deal with them creatively at a human level.

Sarai’s primary failure, of course—her contribution to the potentially deadly family conflict—is her willingness to use Hagar for her own purposes and then to turn against her when problems arise. The first instance (the exploitation of a slave for a legal end) may have been the expectation in the ancient world, but the second instance (mistreating a slave simply because one has the power to do so) was less than acceptable even there.<sup>4</sup>

*C. Abram’s story.* Abram is not a pillar of strength in this story. To be sure, we are not certain he did not regard Sarai’s plan as a valid way to achieve the promise; nevertheless, when he “listened to [her] voice,” he apparently lost his own. Here, certainly, would have been a time (even if it were the first time) to speak of God’s promises and to ask about the best way now to listen not only to Sarai’s plan but to God’s. But Abram does not. This is hardly the Abraham who will be willing to argue with God about the fate of Sodom (Gen 18). Here he is content to be a pawn; he retains that role when the plan seems to fail, abdicating his own moral responsibility by giving Sarai permission to do with Hagar as she pleases. The relation between Abram and Sarai here is not unlike that between Adam and Eve in the temptation narrative. There, too, Eve was the actor and the theologian (there, too, perhaps not the best and most faithful theologian), while Adam remained the bystander, the enabler, the yes-person. Like Adam did with Eve, Abram thereby might leave himself the opening of placing the blame on Sarai; and both might try the Adam and Eve ploy of finally blaming God (“Why didn’t you just give us kids

<sup>4</sup>Even though the slave was property, the rights of the owner were not absolute (cf. Exod 21:20–21, 26–27). Deuteronomy goes even farther in requiring the just treatment of slaves, remembering that Israel had once been “a slave in the land of Egypt” (e.g., Deut 5:14–15).

right away?”). But they will not be able to escape their own culpability. Sarai, by her action, and Abram, by his inaction, contribute to the potentially deadly consequences.

*D. God's story.* God is not at first involved in this story. We know God is out there somewhere, with a grand plan for the world, but nothing has happened recently to advance that plan, and the characters are left to their own devices. As we have seen, Sarai tries to name God's role in events, but we are not certain she does so accurately. The story is not unlike contemporary life. That God has made promises is clear, but how God is working seems unclear. The stage is left open for the muddier and less certain actions of the human players.

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Unlike Abram, however, God does not wash his hands of these events. Hagar was abandoned by Abram and Sarai, but she was “found” by the angel. She was physically “running away” from Sarai, just as Sarai and Abram were emotionally running away from the consequences of their actions, but the angel calls her to “return.” God is on the side of human responsibility. Finally, where Hagar received condemnation from Sarai, from the angel she (and her child) receive a blessing. We still do not know whether this child was intended by God to be *the* child of promise, but, no matter what people have done, he will—in God's eyes—be *a* child of promise. God can bless even the results of human folly—as the narrator of Genesis knows full well: “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good” (50:20).

*Scene Two: The Expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael (Gen 21:8–20)*

Both the reader and the characters know more in scene two than they did in scene one. But that doesn't fix everything. Some problems are dealt with; others are exacerbated.

It is clear to everyone now that the promise will come through both Abraham and Sarah, in preparation for which both have been blessed and given new names (ch. 17).<sup>5</sup> Because of their advanced age, both are incredulous about a promised birth (17:17; 18:12); and, since both are now privy to the promise, both seem cavalier in their willingness to endanger it anew by a second attempt to pass off Sarah as Abraham's sister (20:1–17).<sup>6</sup> At last, however, Isaac is born, and the laughter of embarrassed doubt and shame becomes the laughter of joy (21:6). But the laughter

<sup>5</sup>The fact that Abraham, too, is not renamed until now—rather than when he first received the blessing and the promise—can, of course, be explained by source analysis (chapter 17 is traditionally ascribed to P), or it might be read as an assertion that, with this story, things are genuinely new for him as well. Perhaps he *didn't* know until now that the blessing was to come through Sarah (an assumption buttressed by his appeal on behalf of Ishmael in 17:18).

<sup>6</sup>Sarah's complicity is noted even by Abimelech (20:5).

will not last, for the tensions of scene one have not yet been resolved. Play and laughter will, in fact, be the occasion for renewing the crisis.

A. *Hagar's story.* Again, Hagar's choices are few. In scene one, she shared some blame because of her contempt for Sarai, but now merely playing with her son gives rise to Sarah's jealous wrath, and Hagar is "cast out." This time she is at least given some provisions, but in the desert they cannot last long. Abraham may have heard God's renewed promise to bless her and Ishmael, but we are not certain that Hagar has done so. Her poignant compassion is seen in her unwillingness to look upon the death of the child. When God calls, her eyes are opened, her actions are obedient, and the result is life. This time there can be no return to the family of Abraham and Sarah, but, by procuring Ishmael a wife, Hagar sees to the beginning of a new family.

B. *Sarah's story.* If Hagar is more innocent in this account, Sarah is more guilty. Refusing to "rejoice with those who rejoice" (Rom 12:15), she demands that Hagar be expelled, even though such an expulsion from the protection of the family into the heat of the desert is no doubt a sentence of death. Having imposed her evil will,<sup>7</sup> she disappears from the story. She has refused to do what Israel was called to do: to be a blessing to others (Gen 12:3).

C. *Abraham's story.* The character of Abraham is more ambivalent here. Although he finally acquiesces to Sarah's demand, it is "very distressing" to him, and he does so only after God instructs him to. He provides Hagar with bread and water before he sends her on her way.<sup>8</sup> For the reader, the tension remains. How can this treatment of Hagar be the will of God? How can Abraham allow it to happen?

D. *God's story.* Just as God had showed his faithfulness to Abraham and Sarah in the birth of Isaac, God now remains faithful to Hagar and Ishmael. Once again, despite all the human ambiguity—even evil—God can and will bring a blessing. God's acquiescence in Sarah's plan hardly seems to speak well of God's character, but the narrator and the reader know that life is genuinely ambiguous. This account, where God works in the midst of such ambiguity, may be more credible than one in which everyone lives "happily ever after" all too quickly.<sup>9</sup> God's response to the child's death cries is one of sheer grace. "Fear not," says God, in language typical of the oracle of salvation in response to a lament psalm. God has heard the child's unarticulated cry as though it were a fully articulated lament and responded accordingly. God now opens Hagar's eyes to water—the source of life—and "God was with the boy" as he grew up (21:20).

Unlike scene one, scene two does not end with familial reconciliation and

<sup>7</sup>M. Scott Peck offers as a psychological definition of evil, "the use of power to destroy the spiritual growth of others for the purpose of defending and preserving the integrity of our own sick selves," in *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983) 119.

<sup>8</sup>Source critics rightly point out that stories traditionally ascribed to E often "solve" some of the moral and theological dilemmas raised by J stories. The second account of the endangering of Sarah in chapter 20 (an E version) is another example, resolving the more compromising features of the J version in chapter 12.

<sup>9</sup>Again, source critics speak of the theme of testing often found in E narratives.

reunion. The children of Isaac and the children of Ishmael will be unreconciled—and they remain so, even now. Where scene one suggests that such reconciliation may have been possible, the renewal of the conflict in scene two rules it out. In light of scene one, this breach in the family is not God’s first choice; but, given human recalcitrance, God allows it and works to bless the consequences. The family may break apart, but God will not abandon Ishmael. In fact, Ishmael’s departure may be seen as one more step in the “spreading abroad” of the nations of the earth, willed by God after the flood (10:32).

#### HANNAH, PENINNAH, AND ELKANAH

The conflict in the story of the birth of Samuel is the same as the one surrounding the birth of Isaac: “Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children” (1 Sam 1:2). The development of the plot is quite different, however. Where the actions of Sarah and Abraham promoted division and death, the actions of Hannah and Elkanah promote community and life.

A. *Peninnah’s story.* Peninnah’s role in the story is small but essential. Blessed with children, she, like Hagar, treats the “other woman” with contempt. She “provoked” Hannah severely, “irritating” her, because of her barrenness.<sup>10</sup> One can easily see in Peninnah the “enemy” of the lament psalms, the one who increases the pain of the sufferer by adding psychological and theological torment to physical distress. Like those enemies, if she has her way, Hannah will forever be cut off from her people and her God, for the claim that she stands outside the favor of God will prove true.

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B. *Elkanah’s story.* Where Abraham was part of the problem, Elkanah is not. Given good reason in his own culture to despise and reject Hannah (unable to produce sons to perpetuate his name), he instead responds with loving compassion. He apparently provides her with her share and more in the festival celebration.<sup>11</sup> In the midst of Hannah’s distress—when the danger of total isolation and withdrawal are real—he draws her into conversation. Rather than regarding her as a vehicle to provide him with the commodity of children, he appeals to the value of the rela-

<sup>10</sup>That co-wives are rivals is hardly surprising. As Tikva Frymer-Kensky notes, “the very word in Hebrew for co-wife (*sārā*) means ‘trouble.’” See her *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Free Press, 1992) 127.

<sup>11</sup>The meaning of v. 5 is unclear in Hebrew. But however it is rendered, it includes Hannah in the midst of the family.

tionship itself (“Am I not more to you than ten sons?”)—a striking move for a time sometimes said to regard marriage only as a contract to regulate “property.”<sup>12</sup> Once the child is born, his counsel to his wife (“Do what seems best to you”—1:23), though superficially sounding like Abraham’s abdication of responsibility (“Do to [Hagar] as you please”—Gen 16:6), is altogether different. It recognizes her ability to make her own decisions, while also reminding her of the obligations of her vow (“may the Lord establish his word”).

C. *Eli’s story.* Though there is no parallel in the Sarah/Hagar stories to the character of Eli, his role in the Hannah story is significant. In his prejudicial assumption that Hannah, while praying, is intoxicated, he has the opportunity to blow everything. An ongoing insensitive response, especially on the part of a trusted religious establishment, can have devastating effects on a pious but troubled child of God.<sup>13</sup> Eli finally gets it right, however, and provides Hannah with an experience of worship and pastoral care that allows her to “go in peace.”

D. *Hannah’s story.* Hannah is, of course, the human character on which the story turns.<sup>14</sup> Her barrenness provides the tension of the narrative. The way she deals with her distress provides the internal flow and determines the outcome. Unlike the account of Sarah, here we learn directly from the narrator that God is involved in her trauma (“the Lord had closed her womb”). Like Hagar, she suffers the torments of the second woman. She would have every reason to react with anger or revenge or withdrawal. However, she “presented herself before the LORD.” For Hannah, the problem is not Peninnah’s or Elkanah’s, it is hers—hers and God’s, of course, so she seeks a solution in the proper place. Her apparent faith in Yahweh’s merciful goodness provides her with an attitude of expectation. Her lament and prayer make use of the worship traditions of her people as a vehicle of healing. Her vow to give her child back to God shows that her desire is finally unselfish: once reconciled with God and family, she will not have to hold on to the child to maintain her own status and well-being. Once the child is born, her concern is for his life and nurture; unlike Sarah, there is no jealousy over the prosperity of others. In Hannah’s song (2:1–10)—especially in its literary inclusio relating vv. 1 and 10—she compares what has happened to her (“my ‘horn’ is exalted”) to Yahweh’s messianic deliverance of Israel (“he will...exalt the ‘horn’ of his anointed”). In other words, she sees her life in the proper perspective of the grand scheme of God’s work on behalf of all Israel.

E. *God’s story.* For unexplained reasons (as such reasons are so often unexplained in the Bible and in life), God is somehow involved in Hannah’s distress.

<sup>12</sup>Some of my feminist colleagues remain understandably less than happy with Elkanah’s response, complaining that he still doesn’t get it (“It’s not about you, Elkanah!”).

<sup>13</sup>See Kathleen Lull Seaton, “A Grief Unobserved: Caring for Families Following Early Pregnancy Loss,” *Word & World* 16/1 (1996) esp. 38–39, 41–42.

<sup>14</sup>Although the commentators and the titles in versions of the Bible almost always designate this account with reference to Samuel (e.g., the NRSV’s “Samuel’s Birth and Dedication”), the tension, direction, and characterization of the story make clear that it is, first, a Hannah story, and only secondarily a Samuel story. Note, especially, her positive insistence on first-person singular pronouns in 1 Sam 1:26–28.

God has closed her womb. Even more than the stories of Sarah and Hagar, this story has a theological tension. As in the story of Cain and Abel (or the story of Sarah and Hagar), the issue is not so much whether or why all of God's people do not always prosper (for it never works out that way); the issue is how one deals with such adversity. Where Cain and Sarah take out their understandable frustration with God against another human being, desiring revenge and death, Hannah takes her frustration up with God—where it belongs. And God demonstrates that the divine intention for Hannah and for Israel is positive, that God is moved by human suffering and amenable to human intercession. Through the oracle given to Eli, God responds to Hannah's prayer and grants her petition. Birth and reconciliation are now both possible.

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God remains a God of justice, however. In what appears to be a deliberate verbal connection (because it employs the same rather rare Hebrew word), where Peninnah had "irritated" (רעם) Hannah (1:6), Yahweh "thunders" (רעם) in heaven against the adversaries (2:10). Although it is not up to Hannah to exact revenge on Peninnah, Yahweh makes clear that Peninnah's sin against Hannah is real and has not gone unnoticed. Indeed, the narrator seems to suggest that what Peninnah has done to the least of God's children, she has done to God (cf. Matt 25:40), and that God's wrath is an appropriate response. The theological health of the story comes in the fact that God's judgment is left to God. Exacted by humans, as in Sarah's story, it results in division and death.

#### COMPARING THE STORIES: CONFLICT AND RESOLUTION

We have examined two biblical stories with similar tensions but different resolutions. The conflict is the same: the jealousy and family strife arising when one person is apparently blessed and the other is not. Must this conflict result in the threat of death, or is a more positive result possible? Sarah's story suggests the former; Hannah's story the latter. What can we learn by reflecting on and comparing the two biblical stories?

1. The potentiality and the reality of conflict are real, even among people of God and families of faith. God may or may not be directly involved in the turmoil that produces conflict. The more important question will be how the people involved respond to what is happening to them. God's will for individuals and human history does not negate the human role in the affairs of life. The actions of people in response to the work of God influence the events of family life and the course of history.

2. While conflict is unavoidable as a part of human life together, some responses will exacerbate conflict and some will alleviate it.
3. Conflict is exacerbated when:
  - a. people in real affliction, like Sarah, respond by striking out at another person, defending what they regard as their prerogatives or their turf at the expense of another; such people exercise the self and the will God has given them in an unhealthy way, refusing to recognize the possibility of a path or an outcome that does not entail violence;
  - b. people with real power, like Abraham, abdicate their moral and personal responsibility and simply allow violence to be done to another; such people give up the self and the will God has given them, refusing to recognize the potential value of their own positive involvement;<sup>15</sup>
  - c. people who have genuinely been violated, like Hagar, respond maliciously (her contempt of Sarah); such response simply perpetuates or even heightens the conflict;<sup>16</sup>
  - d. people, like Sarah, make premature or inappropriate theological judgments, deciding that God is either for them or against them, thereby justifying their anger or their despair.
4. Conflict is alleviated when:
  - a. people, like Elkanah, recognize the suffering of another—empathizing with them, drawing them into conversation, and offering them appropriate, if not perfect, assistance;
  - b. people, again like Elkanah, respect the right of others to make their own decisions, while, at the same time, reminding the other person of the broader context and consequences of such decisions;
  - c. people, like Hannah, properly take responsibility for their own situation, seeking both human and divine resources to find a solution;
  - d. people, like Eli, make such resources available; among such resources, alongside counseling and conversation, are words and occasions for prayer and worship, gifts of the community of God's people to those whose distress makes it impossible for them to be self-sufficient;
  - e. people, like Hannah, recognize the involvement of God in human life and develop a life of faith and a theological perspective that promote life and healing and leave the exercise of God's wrath to God.

<sup>15</sup>Whereas the situation in my section 3a is generally thought to be the "male" problem, acting out in prideful violence, 3b is often labeled the "female" problem, giving up the self too quickly. Whatever it means, in these stories, as in the story of Adam and Eve, the roles are reversed. Sarah and Eve are willful where Abraham and Adam are compliant. Though no doubt real, the gender stereotypes do not seem to be absolute, as our stories demonstrate.

<sup>16</sup>This is often the response of children. A child, genuinely wronged by a sibling, responds with an equal or greater wrong and then cannot understand why the parent comes down on the side of the brother or sister.

5. Despite the reality of human conflict and the violence done by humans to one another, God is continually at work to bring good out of evil and to renew and transform human lives so that violence does not have the final word.

What has been gained by this exercise? We have attempted to use the Bible as a resource for understanding human conflict and the possibilities of conflict resolution (a form of biblical imagination?). This produces genuine insights, although candor requires admitting that many of these insights are also available through other literature and other disciplines than biblical study. Still, the biblical material brings its own witness, corroborating some perspectives and opinions and challenging others. For people of faith, such a contribution from biblical study might add a measure of credibility to the advice of the counselor as he or she seeks to provide people with insight into their own situation. Such a methodology invites people, whether counselors or counselees, teachers or learners, to take seriously the biblical voice as one that is not limited to the ancient past, but that interacts with the real life of the present world. Perhaps, more than anything, such reflection, unlike that of most other disciplines, has an explicit interest in what God is doing in human life. It reminds people that God is active in their lives and that one's theological understanding plays a role in one's mental and social health. ⊕

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