



The Consolation of the Firstborn in Genesis: A Lesson for Christian Mission

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One of the more intriguing and persistent motifs in the book of Genesis is that of “deflection of primogeniture,”¹ or “the forsaken firstborn.”² Repeatedly, from the fatal encounter of Cain and Abel in chapter 4 to the puzzling cross-handed blessing of Manasseh and Ephraim in chapter 48, the firstborn is set aside and blessing accrues to the second born. Even the sister-wife strivings of Rachel and Leah (Genesis 29-30) follow this pattern, as does the birth of Perez and Zerah (Genesis 38), with its tantalizing echoes of the intrauterine struggle of Jacob and Esau.

On the popular level, the point of it all is often assumed to be God’s selection of a bearer of promise, and his symmetrical rejection of the other (read “false”) contender. The stories of Isaac and Ishmael and of Jacob and Esau have often been given readings which emphasize the merit of the younger sons at the expense of the elder.

In this essay I will suggest that such readings miss the mark, since they obscure the fact that the one who is “deflected” or “effaced” is, in case after case,

¹Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) 180.

²Roger Syrén, *The Forsaken Firstborn: A Study of a Recurrent Motif in the Patriarchal Narratives* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993).

also blessed as well. At times this blessing may come as somewhat of a consolation prize. But even such consolation is not insignificant.

Further, I will suggest that the narrator³ of Genesis, in providing a text which recognizes this also-blessing of the firstborn, had a theological agenda which not only addressed Israel but which addresses us today as well. In particular, for those of us engaged in global mission, there is a caution: those who are sent to be bearers of blessing must never forget that those to whom they are sent have already been recipients of God’s blessing. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

There are many texts which could be considered in connection with this theme of “the effaced and consoled firstborn.” I will restrict myself to three: Cain and Abel (Genesis 4), Isaac and Ishmael (Genesis 16, 17, 21), and Jacob and Esau (especially Genesis 25, 27, and 33).

I. CAIN AND ABEL

The story of Cain and Abel is the first of the firstborn effacements, and it introduces several motifs in what might be called a thematic prelude. There is a tragic-sympathetic characterization of the firstborn (the careful reader cannot but conclude that Cain is given less than a fair shake), sibling strife, and a possible connection with a foreign neighbor of Israel (the

Kenites). To these we shall return.

The question which cries out most sharply for an answer, however, is the one concerning which the text is silent: *Why* did God choose Abel? This question lies in the background in *each* case of choosing, of course: Why did God choose Jacob? But it is particularly acute in the case of Cain and Abel because (1) God's "looking upon" the one leads to *not* "looking upon" the other,⁴ and (2) it is crystal clear in this instance that God did the choosing quite apart from any actions of Cain or Abel. Brueggemann is right when he says, "Conventional interpretation is too hard on Cain and too easy on Yahweh,"⁵ for nothing is said about the choice of Abel over Cain except that God made it. God's word to Cain in 4:6-7 contains no hint of rebuke regarding his offering. The history of interpretation indicates how uncomfortable all this has made the reader.⁶

The narrator appears to be making three points. The first is quite commonly

³I am not denying the existence of a preliterate history or sources. By "narrator" I merely mean the last person (I do not believe it was a committee!) whose theological agenda shaped the text. It is that agenda I wish to pursue.

⁴Note that the text does *not* say that God "rejected" Cain. I shall return to this point, also.

⁵Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982) 56.

⁶There has, of course, been no end to the seeking of a reason for God's choice. From Luther and Calvin to the recent commentary of Nahum Sarna (*Genesis* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989] 39), suggestions have been made of a spiritual lack on Cain's part. Others have seen the defect to be in Cain's offering itself, perhaps because of an "improper division" or the lack of a blood sacrifice (Von Rad, *Genesis* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972] 104; and, most recently, Hugh C. White, *Narration and Discourse in the Book of Genesis* [New York: Cambridge University, 1991] 155, and James Williams, *The Bible, Violence and the Sacred* [San Francisco: Harper, 1991] passim). What is so significant about these interpretations is that they find no support in the text itself. In a sense, they may reveal more about the theological discomfort of the interpreters than they do about Cain or Abel or their offerings. The text simply does not tell us why.

noted, namely, that God is free to choose whomever he wishes. God is God and we are not, and there are times when one must be able to leave it at that.

The second point: there is no relationship between God's choosing on the one hand and the moral worthiness of the chosen on the other. This becomes painfully clear in the case of Jacob, and the point has obvious implications for an understanding of Israel among the nations.

The third point: God's choosing of one does not mean a rejection of the other. It should be noted that the text does not speak of a *rejection* of Cain—only a looking-upon and a not-looking-upon. This is a crucial point and is developed elsewhere in Genesis as well: God may choose one for (purposeful?) blessing without rejecting another.⁷ A person can be "not chosen" without being rejected. Prior to the murder, there is no indication that Cain is on the outs with God. Indeed, when Cain is chagrined, God brings a word of consolation and points out that if Cain does well there will be a "lifting up." The verse may be fraught with linguistic difficulties, but it is clear that Cain *at that point* has a future and that he has not been rejected.

Finally, even after the murder and the expulsion of Cain, the text goes on to portray his descendants as blessed and successful, the progenitors of "those who dwell in tents and have cattle" (cf. Abraham!), "those who play the lyre and pipe" (cf. David), and those who forged "instruments of bronze and iron." That Cain was later associated with Israel's neighbors, the Kenites,⁸ may not seem significant at present. But we shall note such neighborly connections

with regard to Ishmael and Esau, as well.

II. ISAAC AND ISHMAEL

The pattern of sibling strife and firstborn effacement continues in the narratives regarding Isaac and Ishmael, although the strife itself develops one generation up, on the level of the mothers.⁹ Again, there is a tragic-sympathetic characterization of the firstborn. Indeed, by the time a first-time reader gets to the end of Genesis 16, there is only one possible conclusion: Ishmael is the son of promise, the son promised to Abram in Genesis 15 and born to him by Hagar at the end of Genesis 16. And for those of us who are slow to grasp this, the narrator makes the point three times in succession in the last two verses of Genesis 16: “Hagar bore Abram a son.”¹⁰

⁷Below, I will make a distinction between blessing and “significant” blessing.

⁸For details, see von Rad, *Genesis*, 107.

⁹I would therefore suggest that Sarai's new name “Sarah” (Gen 17:15) literally means “strife,” not the anemic “princess” or “mistress” which is often suggested, for she is given this name after her strife with Hagar in Genesis 16 (and before a repeat in Genesis 21). The spelling of her new name concides—down to the last vowel point—with the spelling of the rare verb *sarah*, “to strive,” which also lies at the heart of Jacob's new name “Israel” (Gen 32:28).

¹⁰It is often wrongly suggested that a lapse of faith led Abram and Sarai to use Hagar in Gen 16:1-2. This was a common practice in ancient times. Furthermore, the first-time reader is kept slightly off balance by the narrator's clever delayed exposition: prior to Gen 17:16, the promise of a son is *to Abram only, not (yet) to Sarah*. Thus, by the end of Genesis 16 the reader is led to believe that *Hagar* is the mother of promise, and *Ishmael* the promised son.

But suddenly the rug is pulled out. In Gen 17:15-21, both Abraham and the reader are shocked to discover that God has yet another plan: Isaac. And, in spite of Abraham's fatherly disappointment and protest, it is clearly Isaac, not Ishmael, who is to become bearer of the covenant (Gen 17:18-21). Yet the rug is not pulled out as completely as it might at first appear. For effaced firstborn Ishmael is also granted a blessing; and it is no small blessing. “As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him” (Gen 17:20). God has not turned a deaf ear to Abraham's pleas, and the blessing which is given to Ishmael may well surprise those who are accustomed to jumping too quickly to the covenant in verse 21.

I will bless him and make him fruitful and multiply him exceedingly; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.

Yes, this is the blessing God gives to *Ishmael*, not Isaac—a blessing replete with significant “fruitful and multiply” language, as well as the promise of “twelve princes” and a “great nation” long before the twelve tribes of Israel were even a twinkle in Jacob's eye. Yet in the short term, Hagar and Ishmael, like Cain, are expelled.

Again, a firstborn effaced but blessed. Again, sympathetic portrayals: one cannot help but feel that Hagar and Ishmael get short-changed. And again, foreign connections: for Hagar is an Egyptian; and Ishmael becomes father of the Ishmaelites, who represent a number of Israel's near neighbors and who, of course, are today associated with the Arab world. Ishmael's blessing is not

the “significant” blessing received by Isaac (in this case, the covenant).¹¹ Isaac has indeed been chosen to be the bearer of that which was promised to Abraham (a promise which itself bears significance for “all the families of the earth”). Yet Ishmael’s blessing is no small blessing, and, at first glance, may appear to be even greater than that of Isaac. It should also not be overlooked that in the encounters of Sarah and Hagar, Sarah at times appears petty and shrewish. Furthermore, it is Hagar—not Sarah—who is the recipient of two theophanies (Genesis 16 and 21) and a full-fledged annunciation (Gen 16:11-12).

III. JACOB AND ESAU

The figure of Jacob dominates the last half of Genesis, and the fact that he is fully patriarchal in image by the end of the Joseph novella may lead us to forget what a scoundrel he is in the earlier chapters.

Jacob’s conduct in the red pottage affair (Genesis 25) and the machinations of Rebekah and her quick-study son over against hapless husband/father Isaac and son/brother Esau (Genesis 27) may lead the reader to question whether this is

¹¹I speak of “significant” blessing, because one cannot properly (textually) speak of “covenant” beyond Gen 17:21 . Yet since, as we have noted, it is not merely a matter of God blessing one and not another, we need some type of language to distinguish between the blessing associated with the Abrahamic promises and the equally (though differently) valid blessing of God upon the effaced firstborn. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 183, speaks of “the tension between the one *elected* and the not-elected one who is *treasured*.”

seemly conduct for the foreparents of a chosen people. The narrator is tight-lipped (at least here) concerning his own opinion of these incidents, and, interestingly enough, God is completely off-stage, as he is when Jacob flees his brother’s wrath, goes wife-hunting, and finally gets his come-uppance in Genesis 29.¹²

Again, we have a sympathetic portrayal of the effaced firstborn, although it takes a while to develop. Esau may be depicted as a bumptious bumpkin and not overly bright in Genesis 25,¹³ but in Genesis 27 he is simply treated shabbily, and the reader knows it. We must wait a few chapters to see how all this resolves, however, since Jacob now flees to the old country, has his encounters with uncle Laban, marries two, sires thirteen, and returns. On this return trip, he tries to slip by his older brother, who, as progenitor of the Edomites, has now become a man of means in Seir. But Jacob’s subterfuge¹⁴ fails and serves only to bring forth Esau with 400 men. And then a transformation takes place.

In the final and climactic encounter of Jacob and Esau (Genesis 33), the elder brother is portrayed with dignity and magnanimity. Jacob is all blandish and grovel, seeking to cut his losses by dividing his wealth, and then making his final approach with bows and fawning. Esau, however, maintains his dignity through it all and will take nothing from Jacob,¹⁵ for he, too, has been blessed. He has a following of 400 men¹⁶ (far more than Jacob), and, in his own words, “I have enough my brother” (Gen 33:9). Again, the effaced firstborn, though not receiving the significant blessing, has nonetheless been greatly blessed.¹⁷

¹²Even the oracle of 25:23 is ambiguous in terms of being an indicator of God's will. Other divine pronouncements in Genesis are delivered at God's own initiative, not in response to human inquiry. Concerning

Jacob's come-uppance, the narrator reserves his rather subtle judgment until Genesis 29. Note how Laban's wry "It is not done so in our country" (29:26) may well reflect back upon Jacob's earlier usurping of his elder brother's blessing (Genesis 27). For a discussion of the parallel usage of darkness/blindness/weak eyes, and the firstborn motif in these two narratives, see Zvi Jagendorf, "In the morning, behold, it was Leah': Genesis and the Reversal of Sexual Knowledge," *Prooftexts* 4 (1984) 187-92.

¹³For instance, note the blunt string of five consecutive verbs joined by *waw* which concludes the story: "and he ate, and drank, and rose, and left, and despised" (Gen 25:34).

¹⁴English versions mistranslate and miss the point. In Gen 32:4-5, Jacob's carefully and precisely worded message contains all *singulars*: "an ox, an ass, a flock, a manservant and a maidservant." He is not boasting about his wealth (a foolish move in his delicate situation) but is rather *trying to plead poor and thus sneak by unnoticed*.

¹⁵Nothing, that is, until Jacob finally mentions the "magic word" and offers to return the blessing (*berakah*, Gen 33:11) which he stole so many years before. English translations obscure this point when they translate *berakah* as "gift" or "present" (RSV, NRSV, NEB, TEV, IV) rather than "blessing." The reader may also be expected to note a certain assonance between *berakah*, "blessing," and *bekorah*, "the rank and rights of the firstborn."

¹⁶The 400 men are a puzzle that is never explained. If Esau is out to ravage Jacob, then why doesn't he? When he later offers to send some of his men along to protect Jacob and his entourage, and Jacob refuses, certainly Esau could have forced the issue if his intentions were not honorable. One possibility might be that Esau, in light of his previous encounters with his deceptive brother and not knowing what would now obtain, brought the men along for protection!

¹⁷This blessing is further confirmed in the expansive genealogy of Esau in chapter 36, with all its mentions of chiefs and "the kings who reigned in the land of Edom, before any king reigned over the Israelites" (36:31).

IV. THE CONSOLATION OF THE FIRSTBORN: AN INTERPRETATION

The narratives in Genesis concerning effaced and consoled firstborn display an interesting pattern, portions of which we have already discussed. On the one hand, there is a tragic-sympathetic portrayal of the firstborn. On the other, there are often minor and ambiguous infractions which may (this is not always clear) lead to the effacement.¹⁸ The stories are pervaded by strife between the concerned siblings (or, in one case, their mothers). There is both blessing and significant blessing; that is, the firstborn is not left unblessed, but appears to prosper greatly as well, although the blessing of Abraham goes to the second born. Finally, in the cases which we have considered above, there appears to be a universal concern (which is already evident elsewhere in Genesis¹⁹). That is to say, the effaced firstborn (and, in one case, a mother) represent the nations around Israel with which the chosen people had to deal.

Although on the one hand Genesis is not hesitant to say that the significant blessing is given to Israel, on the other those who are effaced are neither written off nor cursed. In fact, there is enough ambiguity in the way Cain, Ishmael, and Esau are treated to raise questions concerning the narrator's intent. Certainly it is too much to speak of a subversive voice, for again it is clear that in Genesis Israel is the recipient of the significant blessing. Yet there does seem to be a certain discomfort expressed with regard to relationships with, or treatment of, near neighbors. There is a concern to show that even those who are not chosen have been blessed by God also. Israel is not the sole recipient of God's blessing, and the narrator presents us with a self-effacing image of Israel's forebears which is matched by a sympathetic portrayal of the also-blessed neighbor. Indeed, according to the Abrahamic blessing of Genesis 12, Israel is to be a vehicle of blessing to the nations.²⁰ It is not the purpose of this essay to work out the provenance of the book of Genesis, but if its final form is as late as postexile one might imagine a voice seeking to counter the exclusiveness of, say, a Nehemiah. There is, for instance, none of the bitterness

toward Edom which we encounter in Ps 137:7.

Such an emphasis has implications for those of us who are interested or involved in global mission. The parallel is not perfect, but is clear enough to be

¹⁸I have already mentioned the questions concerning Cain and his sacrifice and alluded briefly to Esau's "despising" of his birthright. Much could also have been said about the ambiguous report of Ishmael's "playing" in Gen 21:19. Was he simply "playing" (MT) or playing "with Isaac" (LXX)? And is "playing" a sufficient translation of *xj q* (*piel*), or should the word bear a more negative connotation (as Paul takes it, following centuries of rabbinic tradition, in Gal 4:29)? These ambiguities may be deliberate on the part of the narrator.

¹⁹We do not have the space to demonstrate this, but we can at least note how Genesis does not move directly from creation to Jerusalem in the way that, for instance, *Enuma Elish* draws a direct line from creation to Babylon. Rather, Genesis passes from creation through the nations, and only then to the chosen people.

²⁰At the same time, throughout Genesis it is questionable just how much of a blessing Abraham and his descendants are to those around them (for instance, to pharaoh, Abimelech, and Laban). Furthermore, some of the Jacob-Esau encounter may be a sober reflection upon David's subjugation of the Edomites.

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noted. Most of us who work overseas are sufficiently sociologically aware to avoid the old bogeyman of cultural imperialism. Yet again and again we may find ourselves stumbling over a certain smug self-assurance, perhaps born of our technological superiority and our worship of efficiency (at the expense of social relationships?). Certainly it is not a matter of chosen versus not-chosen. Receiving churches are clearly just as chosen as are sending churches.

Yet there is a tension. We who have been sent (by our own churches), or, more often today, requested (by overseas church leadership), can usually spell out rather clearly just what we are about and the gifts (blessing) we are bringing. We may become a bit more diffuse, however, when asked to spell out the particular strengths and blessings of the churches to whom we have been sent.

Certainly we have been called to bring (significant) blessing, whether in terms of primary evangelism or working-alongside ministries such as medical teams or seminary faculties. In so doing, however, it is important for us to realize that those to whom we have been sent or called and with whom we work are themselves people already blessed by God—and that this blessing is independent of anything we bring. This is not to discredit the significant blessing which we bear. But it is, to use the New Testament image, to recognize what it means to be an "earthen vessel." It is to recognize that we bear blessing, but not all possible blessing. And it is to recognize, and not devalue, blessing which God has imparted quite apart from our own presence and activity. In so doing, we not only gain a proper humility, but soon find ourselves to be receivers as well as bearers.

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