

Perspectives



Tell Me a Story

IN HIS CLASSIC GENESIS COMMENTARY,¹ HERMANN GUNKEL TELLS OF HOW THE ancients would have enjoyed a story that now gives us great difficulty: Abraham's pawning off of Sarah as his sister in order to save his own skin (Gen 12:11-20). In Gunkel's view, the story glorifies the cleverness of the tribal father, the beauty and sacrificial spirit of the mother, and the faithfulness of Yahweh. The storyteller, Gunkel thinks, thoroughly enjoyed getting Sarah into difficulty, worrying his audience, and then regaling them with how she and Abraham got away with the treasures of Egypt—an early version of *The Mouse that Roared*.

Our trouble is that we can't get beyond the story's chauvinistic disregard for Sarah, indeed, its willingness to see her at least psychologically if not physically abused. Susan Niditch is correct: "This is no woman-affirming tale."² Even just among the guys, it's hard to be amused at such things these days.

The contrast between ancient and modern readings of this story reminds us of how stories work. Which reading is correct? Well, are you an ancient or a modern? And which ancient? Or which modern? Stories mean more than one thing; they are heard in more than one way—which, of course, is one of the reasons they are told and retold. I don't need to hear about Sarah and Abraham again, I heard about them when I was a kid—except that, as an adult, I hear the story differently. The writers of Genesis were so confident of this that they were willing to tell the story (in various forms) three times, certain that we would hear something new in each telling, in each context. And right they were. Stories are to tell; stories are to be heard. Good telling and good hearing will work new meaning every time.

It has sometimes been said that when the Brothers Grimm collected and recorded the German fairy tales in the nineteenth century they saved them and killed them at the same time. They certainly saved them from being lost in the move to an industrial age, with its less magical views of the world and its dragons of a different order; at the same time, they contributed to the death of the stories' growth and vitality by crystallizing them in one form and at one stage in their development. Red Riding Hood's enemy in the woods will now forever be the wolf rather than, say, pesticide residues or drug dealers.

¹After almost a century, Gunkel's Genesis commentary has just appeared in English, translated by Mark Biddle (Macon: GA: Mercer, 1997).

²Susan Niditch, "Genesis," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsome and Sharon H. Ringer (London: SPCK; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992) 18.

Did the biblical writers do the same thing, kill the stories even as they gathered them? Only if we let them. We would let this happen, I think, by adoring too much the stories in their present shape. There is much to admire there. Awe is warranted. But the stories “want” retelling more than they want adoration. They “want” to be turned loose more than they want to be preserved. The Bible is not a story museum; it is a lending library—and a free one at that. Check the stories out, and retell them with a careful combination of playful abandon and witness to God in Jesus Christ. That will invoke the breath of the Spirit. That will honor them best.

We seek to pay them such honor in this issue of *Word & World*. In soliciting authors, we had no idea what they would choose to do. We are delighted that no two have responded in the same way. There are old stories and modern stories, intrabiblical and extrabiblical comparisons, dramas and essays. Such diversity is just right. It keeps the stories alive, and it reminds us to go and do likewise.

F.J.G.