

Episode: 353 | He'Brew | Abram, Sarai, and Hagar
Project Zion Podcast

Josh Mangelson 00:17

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts, Community of Christ offers for today's world.

Karin Peter 00:33

Welcome to He'brew, the Project Zion Podcast series that reduces Old Testament bitterness, through explanation, exploration, and experiencing the Old Testament text. Our guides through this Old Testament experience or Hebrew Scriptures are Tony and Charmaine Smith, who many of you know, and I'm your host, Karin Peter, and today's episode, we are navigating the story of Abram, Sarai and Hagar or Abraham and Sarah. This is a complicated triad of relationships. And that's an understatement. It has a lot of trigger points. And so let's see how Tony and Charmaine unraveled this story. Tony, Charmaine, let's get started.

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:23

Okay, great work, we're happy to dive into this one. And we'll start with explaining our explanation first and want to say is that the Abraham and Sarah stories are found in a part of Genesis that scholars refer to as the ancestral saga starts in chapter 12 goes to chapter 50. And within this saga, we have several cycles of stories about families that are the Israelites ancestors. So first of all, Abraham and Sarah or a Abram and Sarai, those those names appear both both of those names appear in the text. And you just need to know that the people who are way better in Hebrew than I am today will tell us that those are just dialectical variants. Both names mean the same. Abram, or Abraham in Hebrew means exalted father or grandfather, or if you will, Big Daddy, we can call him Big Daddy.

Karin Peter 02:19

And already sorted out a triad here, Tony, let's not make it more complicated.

Tony Chvala-Smith 02:25

Sara or Sarai means princesses. So we go, it's not getting any better, Karin.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:35

It sounds like they maybe picked their own names, you know?

Tony Chvala-Smith 02:40

Their, their stories are the first of the cycle of family stories, they go from approximately Genesis 12 to around 26. And then we have the stories of Isaac and Rebecca, and then Jacob and Leah. But also Jacob had Leah, Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah. So So Jacob had a larger, a larger family cluster we'll say there. And then this saga ends with a very long, a very long short story, a novella that goes from Genesis 36, all the way to 50. It's the story of Joseph in Egypt. That's a fabulous story. That's an independent piece of narrative that was woven into Genesis and kind of rounds out, it rounds out the story of the ancestors. And then where we end up at the end of Genesis is with the people of Israel's ancestors being in Egypt, not as slaves yet, as as welcome guests, but that's how they get into Egypt.

So, so that's, that's this big cycle of stories where we're in. And today, what we're going to focus on is stories that take place in Genesis 15, 16, and 21. And in Genesis 15, what we have is one of the subtle places that were where God and Abraham make a covenant. And this one is the spookiest, other than this is kind of a creepy story. But it's really an important story. And so we'll just take a quick look at it. It's an excerpted the most important parts here, God first appears to Abraham in chapter 12, and basically makes this promise of a child of land, and that through his descendants, all of the nations of the earth will bless themselves literally is how it reads in Hebrew. So this promise keeps getting remade, because this promise is hard to trust. Abraham and Sara are beyond way beyond childbearing years. And Abraham has, he's got stuff he's got, you know, animals and servants but he doesn't have an heir and he doesn't have land. So the promise comes up and Abraham finds it difficult to trust this, this scene in chapter 15 is one of those places where Abraham has to push back on God and God does something rather remarkable. So here it goes like this. But Abram said, "Oh Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it either land? God said to him, bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat, three years old, a ram, three years old, a turtle dove and a young pigeon. He brought them to God, all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other, but he did not cut the birds into. And when the birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. When the sun had gone down, and it was dark, a smoking firepot and the flaming torch passed between these pieces." That's a that's a Halloween ish sort of scene. And what we have here is a story of a Theophany, or a divine appearance at God appears in the form of this smoking firepot and flaming torch, not smoking pot, but smoking a firepot and flames. It's a light visual, right? It's a light visual. And so this this is, this is a scene in chapter 15, where God is, is essentially repeating what the covenant is about only this time, what's really interesting in the story is the that the paraphernalia or the apparatus, right? We know some things about ancient covenant treaties. And the particular description of this covenant treaty. We know things about, for example, when two persons made a covenant like this in the ancient Middle East, with the split animal pieces, the custom was that both parties in the covenant would walk between the split pieces. So you've got these animals, they've been sacrificed, their carcasses are split down the middle, there's a little path between them and both parties walk between the pieces, symbolizing that if I don't keep my part of the agreement, you can do this to me. So it's a pretty big deal. What's really fascinating here in Genesis 15, is that only God in the form of the smoking firepot and flaming torch passes between the pieces. In other words, this this covenant, God is basically saying, "Abram, this one's on me, I'm the one who's going to make sure that this happens." So it's in some respects, it's a kind of unilateral covenant. It's not it's not a bilateral what it what Abram has to do is trust, trust that God is going to come through on this in this kind of strange, ancient Near Eastern treaty. God is actually transforming the nature of the treaty, right before Abraham's eyes. That is what people had done with this kind of Covenant, God is saying, I'm going to eliminate the threat from all that. And in fact, I'm the one I got him, the one who's going to, I'm going to take on the whole burden of helping you fulfill this covenant. So it's, it's quite a remarkable covenant becomes a covenant of grace here, it's a gift that God is going to carry the burden of the covenant for Abraham. So this is this is an interesting place in the storyline. Probably we should have had a little bit of text right before this in chapter 15, verse six, where, where Abraham says that Abraham trusted trust put his trust in God and God counted it as righteousness. In other words, simply trusting that God could see this promise through was what Abraham had to do. And I think that's, that's something that still has, you know, powerful message for us today. Trusting, trusting in God is actually profoundly difficult. But it's

the place where we, where life begins to open up for us. So the other two texts, we're going to just consider these these texts are about the story of Hagar. And, of course, there's some difficult some difficult dimensions to these texts. And also some things in these texts that connect to other things we know about the ancient Near East. So in Genesis 16, one of many times that Sariah and our Abram are getting impatient about the fulfilling of this covenant. They're not they're not getting pregnant. Right. And, you know, and

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 09:54

It's been a while it's been a while

Tony Chvala-Smith 09:57

Decades. That's the clock the ticker clock stopped a long time ago actually for Sariah, so, so Sariah decides to take matters into her own hand. And so in this text in in Genesis 16, she has a slave girl named Hagar. And she says to Abram, alright, the Lord has prevented me from having children. So go into my slave girl, so that it may be that I shall obtain children by her. And let me just stop for a second. We know from Babylonian law, and from Hourian law, ancient law codes from different peoples of ancient Greece, we know that there were precedents for this were certain tasks of people, the if the wife failed to produce a child, she could get a concubine for her husband from a lower caste. And then what was required, if that concubine was able to produce a child was that the child became the original wife's child. And secondly, that the concubine could not become, I don't know, arrogant or haughty about it. Otherwise, she'd be returned to her slave status. So this little story fits what we know. I mean, there's aspects of it that fit well, we know about practices in ancient Greece, so surprised, like, Alright, God's not coming through. So we got to do something. Abram, and Hagar are able to conceive a child, and they have the child. And Hagar is like, well, this is pretty cool. I'm actually pretty amazing. And she looks with contempt on her mistress is what the text says. So what happens then to Sariah, expels are actually hymn probably beats her up, and she runs away. And in the running away, she meets the angel of the Lord. And there's a whole long senior. That's really cool. And

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 12:03

we'll come back to this passage for the Bible study part. Yeah, yeah. Don't give away too much.

Tony Chvala-Smith 12:09

I won't give away too much. So it's just a really neat scene. And then we go, we jump ahead to chapter 21. And in chapter 21, finally, finally, Sarah, has a child, Isaac, and the name Isaac eats in Hebrew has to do with laughter. And so Sarah's, like, oh, God has brought laughter for me, everyone who hears will laugh with me. And she said, Who would ever said to Abraham and Sarah would nurse children, yet I have born him a son in his old age. And you notice the language there. The focus of these texts is highly, highly patriarchal. It's the woman's value, in many respects, in this cultural context is in providing a child for the man and heir for the man. So that's, we just have to name that that's part of the text. So child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. What we know about that is sometime in the third year, the life of the child, typically in Ancient Near East, but Sarah, Sarah saw the son of Hadar Egyptian whom she had born to Abraham playing with her son, Isaac. The older son is now playing with the little kid, right? So she said to Abraham, cast out this slave woman with her son, for the for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit along with my son,

Isaac. The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son, which is really understated. So but God said to Abraham, do not be distressed. Because of this, because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says, you do, do what she tells you and I am going to make a nation through this other child. So that's pretty that's pretty much what's happening in these places, is the covenant that God made with Abraham and Sarah, the covenant is being extended. It's been extended to Hagar, and being extended to Ishmael. And so that's pretty important here. God is not imprisoned by God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah. And there is God makes covenants in Genesis, but God is flexible to about how those will be achieved, and who can be included in them. So those are those those are the stories we're going to kind of focus on it earlier called this part of Genesis, the ancestral saga. So what's a saga? Well, a saga is a narrative made up of stories and traditions and legends about key figures in founding events from from like the past heroic age or from a particular group of people's origins, origins. That's what a saga is. I think that's important for us to know about this part of Genesis 12 to 15. As a saga, it's not it's not history in our modern incense, there's a lot of theology woven into it a lot. And also, as we mentioned, in our previous podcasts, on Genesis, you can find you can find the sources all woven together here, J, the Yahwist, E, the Elohist, and P, the Priestly source, the three of those four sources that came together to in the creation of the Torah. So Charmaine's gonna pull those up. And we'll just give a little repeat on on those. So everybody knows what we're talking about. So the, the documentary hypothesis for the formation of the Torah, which was developed in the early 1800s, and which many scholars still see treat as a good way to solve a lot of difficulties in these five books identifies at least four particular sources, the Yahwist, it's called J, because the scholars who first invented this were Germans, and they don't have a Y, they have a J. And so when they wrote Yeah, what do they use the J. So this source exclusively uses yahweh, or Lord yahweh, as a term for God. Now, typically, in modern translations, wherever yahweh appears LORD in capital letters, is is is used to elevate source is more fragmentary. And it uses the term Elohim, that kind of standard Hebrew term for deity uses that for God exclusively. And it's typically translated as God. The priestly source is identifiable in it's concerned with order and genealogy and rituals and where people came from the numbers and laws and things related to worship. So the priestly, the Priestly School will call it where the hands that did the final editing of the Torah, they've stamped the whole D refers to the Deuteronomy, or the Deuteronomistic source. It's a source that's found first in Deuteronomy. And it has a very specific theology and view of history. And that particular source then influences everything judges through kings thereafter. So JEPV. Now in in the stories in the sa, in the ancestral saga JEPV, are constantly being woven together, which is why you find sometimes what sounds like repeats of a story. That's because both sources had some version of the story. And the editors of Genesis are just kind of weaving a tapestry out of it. So now, when, when when did these ancestral stories take place if we can locate them in history? And the simple answer is we can't, it's impossible. It's impossible. There are features of the stories which locate which allow us to locate them, to some extent, in what historians would call the second millennium BCE, which is from 2000, down to 1000 BCE, sometime in there,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 18:02

You can see my cursor at 1290 is roughly when the exodus happened. So it's, it's way before that, so if you think 2000 back this way, to the left. But it's difficult, as Tony said, impossible to really say exactly when these things happen.

Tony Chvala-Smith 18:25

So the other thing is that these these stories were told and retold so much in ancient Israel, that they started taking on the the flavor the scent of later eras. And so it's sometimes hard to to unravel, later ideas from earlier ideas in these stories. So these when these stories are finally in the written form, we're reading them in and translation that's in the Babylonian exile. And so that that experience of the exile is again kind of flavoring how the stories are retold.

Karin Peter 18:56

So down here where it says exile. This is a really, this is a pivotal point, a crucial point for our understanding of the Old Testament, how it came together. It's because during this time, while the Judeans are in exile, they decide they need to write everything down. And so the stories that had been passed on for hundreds of years 1000s of years, Abraham and Samurai and, and, and Hagar these are now being written down in some forms, or, or maybe some forms of the story that had been written down in Israel and some that were in Judah are now being compiled together because the recognition that needs to be some written records of who they are so they can keep their identity. So in this time, the editors are pulling all of these stories together, but they are influenced by their own situation by this being out of you know pulled out of their own country, and wondering, where is God in all of this? Why? Why did we lose our land and our name and our identity? And how do we keep our connection with God? And so the editors can't help but write some of their own story into these, this long tradition of Abraham and Sariah and Abraham and Sarah and Hagar stories. So that's a whole nother element, a whole nother layer, as we're reading these is to say how much of this story is that what parts of the story being accentuated by the writers to kind of help express their own doubts or faith or lack of faith, or trying to trust in this uncertain time for them?

Tony Chvala-Smith 20:47

So So judeans, during the exile, are actually seeing themselves and overlaying themselves into the stories of the ancestors, I think is a another way to imagine what's going on there. Now, the set the centerpiece of the ancestral saga, is God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah. And God, you don't, God in the sagas depicted in various ways. Sometimes God is depicted as very near and close. Sometimes God is depicted as very mysteriously distant, and has to be represented by a flaming torch. Right? Sometimes God is unconditionally supportive as in that covenant seeing we just walk through other times, God's God's activity raises all kinds of questions for us also did for the ancient readers, for example, when he tests Abraham, with the threat of sacrificing Isaac, so God, God's character profile is rather mixed, mixed in these in the sagas, but that's what you would expect with a saga, a saga that has been woven together from different sources and different memories. So finally, I just want to define covenant talked about covenant for a moment, because covenant is really central to this collection of stories. So a covenant is a treaty, or a formalized pact, a promise a pact between two parties. And the Hebrew, Hebrew term for making a covenant is ברית. So a אִמְנָה, you know, one of these, it's a treaty of some kind. And the word גזירה in Hebrew, the verb literally means to cut. So in a sense, we could say that making a covenant is like cutting a deal, our English expression to cut deals, the closest thing we have is to a literal translation of corroboree. So God is depicted in the saga as a covenant and God, a God, who is relational, who enters into a relationship with people who makes promises to them. And who is going to see these promises through regard, regardless of the ups and downs of the main character's faith, life will say. So trust, trusting in God to see the the finalization of the covenant, that's what the characters have to do. And one of the things I love about the ancestral sagas is that these

characters are so vividly human to us. Of course, Abraham was distressed when Sarah says, You got to get rid of her. And the child too, of course, he's distressed. And you start when you start to see what kind of a weird marriage triangle, love triangle that is, and how complicated it became very quickly, and how jealousy enters into it right away. It's like, man, we, we actually can see ourselves in these narratives. There's, there is deceit, there is white lying there is saving your own butt, there is all kinds of stuff going on in these narratives that are really part of the human experience. And so, across mean, across centuries and centuries of time, the stories of these figures still, I think, still engage us because we can relate to them. So. So that's God covenants with God covenants with people who are not moral exemplars. And I think that's actually good news. I think that's one of the great aspects of this particular set of texts.

Karin Peter 24:34

So I just want to visit that a little bit more and ask you to say a little bit more about that. Because that's not how we're taught to read these stories. As we grow up reading scripts, or we're taught, we're taught to try to make religious sense out of Sarah's really horrible behavior towards Hagar. And we're trying we were taught to try to find the heroic value of Abraham's behavior. And so what you're saying is that we have permission then to simply look at them as flawed human beings mucking their way through life circumstances, much the same way we do.

Tony Chvala-Smith 25:17

Absolutely.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 25:18

We don't just want to give permission, we want to encourage that. And actually, that really takes us back to one piece that we want to keep lifting up each time. And that is about how we're approaching scripture, what we're seeing scripture as we're, we're using in and telling scripture, as the stories of people who've had encounter with God, who are doing what they can to express that and pass that on. And so it's shaped by their language, their culture, their expectations of things like marriage, or, or manhood or womanhood, all of those things are part of their experience. And so that's what will necessarily come into their telling of their experience with God. their experience with God is not the final word, but it is a word. And so we're letting it be that for us to say, as we put ourselves as we hear these passages, and as we start to think about, what would what's a normal human reaction in these kinds of settings? What is faith or trust really? And was theirs that much different than ours? So we're trying to find those human connections. And so we really want to not only accept, but value, the messed up pneus of these characters, because they are, and you know, for those who this is dating oneself, but it's like the Jerry Springer, kinds of the Jerry Springer show where even of all these dysfunctional people coming in, and it's quite entertaining. But you know, there's some times when you can kind of go, as much as I hate to admit it, I kind of understand what she or he is upset about, or why this might have happened and weird thing might have happened in the first place. So yes, we we think scripture is exciting because of those things. Because it shows and the Old Testament writers, for the most part, are really good about showing the flaws, the inconsistencies, the self interest, the pride, the greed, all of these kinds of things,

Tony Chvala-Smith 27:37

The moral questionable, most

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 27:42

Irresponsible sexual desires. I mean, it's, it's all there. And and also there is this God who stays with them. And, and continues to invite. So yes, thank you for for, for going there. Because that was my next little point, I just jotted in Oh, we need to talk about scripture, and how we see it and how we're using it here. So perfect. So we're going to go into the Explore part. And so Tony did explain. And so the Explore part is exploring what are some of the problems and questions? What are some ways we can explore this situation of the characters, and maybe come to understand them a little bit better? And so Karin, I think you had some, some observations and questions about this text, and you can just toss those out. And we can maybe respond to some of them and ignore some of them if we don't want to go there.

Karin Peter 28:49

Talk about them a little bit. So it is, it is an uncomfortable story, I think from a lot of perspectives. And we talked about this in the first episode that we we have our own contextual lens that we look through, but we also have our own lens of experience that we look through. And so for people that have experienced infertility or mistreatment at the hands of family members, or who are recovering from the either the denial of polygamy in the old RLDS tradition or the reality of it in the LDS tradition, or, or even just the complications of blended families, there's trigger points in this story that make it really hard to get through. So what do we what do we do with that when we're reading?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 29:54

There's a number of things that we can do with that and the first thing is remembering That These are stories of people's lives. And that this is not God's spoken words that this is how it should be. Or that this is how we should shape our lives, I think that's a helpful place to begin to let this text be what it is, and where it's from. And, and read it with all its complexities. And, and take those opportunities to identify with some of the characters, but to not project on yourself there, the outcomes of their situations. Does that makes sense?

Karin Peter 30:41

So it does in that if we, if we keep in mind, everything that we're learning about context. A lot of things here are cultural context and human frailty, combined, as opposed to God telling us this is how things should work is that?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 30:57

It's exactly one of the things I really think is important here is that sometimes we want to make whatever is in Scripture normative, as though somehow It's okay. It's okay to treat people this way. It's okay, that there are these in equitable social structures, where some people have no choice. And some people seemingly have all the choices depending on their level of wealth, or their gender, where they fit into these castles of the tides of time. So I mean, those are all important that we not then bring those into this time and culture and say, Oh, well, since it's there, in the Old Testament, it's in the Bible. And we're supposed to use the Bible as this blueprint for our lives. So let's pick it up and use it. Well, that's,

that's one of those irresponsible uses scripture, because it's letting the book and the stories in it suffice. Well, favorite place, what the purpose of the book is, is just to build a relationship with God. You know, these are people pointing to the God relationship in their lives, and trying to explain it the best they can. And it's an invitation for us to see the god part in our lives. But we don't, we're not all walking around in robes, right, with sandals in the middle of winter.

Karin Peter 32:21

Well it's COVID, so some of us are.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 32:24

Good point. Sweat pant shorts under our robes, but yes, yeah, exactly. So that's one of the things I think we need to look at. And here's another piece that I think will be helpful. Again, if we don't have any options, we look at the text. And we read it and we say, Well, this is how things are. And so that whole idea that was in the chapter 16, where sariah is talking about not having children. There's this, this statement, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. And I'm going to say a little bit more about the social context of that. Tony's gonna address the theological approach to that.

Tony Chvala-Smith 33:20

Yeah. Well, I want to talk about worldviews here. And that's so in, in the biblical world, in the ancient world, ancient Near Eastern world. People, people did not have a working understanding of multiple levels of causality in the world, right? So any, any out of the ordinary event was attributed to the divine, or the divine realm, because they don't have an understanding of weather systems. They don't have an understanding of climate, they don't have an understanding of fertility and infertility. There there are, there are so many things that we take for granted in our worldview, which is shaped by modern and postmodern science. That's, and definitely, we want to keep that worldview. We definitely want to keep that worldview

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 33:21

One that has some science, right?

Tony Chvala-Smith 34:12

One has some science and some vaccines and some penicillin, right? So so we can't fault them for not having scientific knowledge that wasn't even available, yet. Their way of making sense of their world was without the layers of causality in the universe that we come to look at. We would never say God is the cause of this podcast. Right?

Karin Peter 34:36

Well, anybody listening to this would never say that so I think we're good.

Tony Chvala-Smith 34:39

So yeah, so

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 34:40

Or the mistakes that are in it are not of God.

Tony Chvala-Smith 34:43

Right? So philosophically, or theologically speaking, ultimately, in terms of ultimate causes, God who created the universe, etc. you can trace that causality to God, but that's not very satisfying to us know the causality of this podcast. We're more interested in the technology that makes it work, the people who are behind it, the people who imagined it, and so on that's we're more interested in that level of causality makes sense of these to us. And we don't typically need an ultimate layer of causality to make sense of it. What if we didn't have any of that? What if all we had were ultimate causes, and nothing else. When you attribute you attribute, Sarah attributes her not having children to God, and so we have to understand, that's their worldview. And there's nothing incumbent upon us, that should make us have to take their worldview, and somehow baptize it and make it our worldview. We're not required in order in order to serve God, we're not required to live in the 17th century BCE. Right? That would be bizarre. We live we relate to God in the world of the 21st century that we know. And these stories have lots of things to teach us about the divine human encounter and relationship that can help us live in that world uniquely, but giving us a giving us an understanding of infertility is not one of the things these texts were designed to do. So that's what lets a theologians approach to that, that question they're so mean.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 36:10

And that's one of the things in our, in our present culture that is so frustrating is when you see a, a Christian say, Oh, well, the hurricane that destroyed New Orleans, was definitely a judgment from God, you know, and so it's, it's like throwing out all of these other understandings of causality that we have, and very selectively deciding where it is that that God is the actor in all of those settings. But in this time, the single causality for Abraham and Sariah and eventually, the Israelites in Jewish people, there's that one causality for other religious groups, other ways, other groups, their, their causality was their God or their Gods, and things would be attributed to them. Because those are the only things that could see understand as having effect on their, on their person or on their reality. I think that's a really important piece, whenever even into parts of the New Testament, you're going to see that as well. And so it's important to see that everything attributed to God, there's other ways of looking at it, that we have, that they wouldn't have had, and that that's okay, that's where they are. I want to take a look at these three characters in the story. Because those stories are short, but there's so much revealed about human nature in it. So there's this theme that's running through the whole Abraham and Sariah story that these people are not some kind of saints who have great faith, and perfect morals. Instead, we have a man who to save his own hide, is willing to pass his wife off as his sister to the Pharaoh and the king, so that he can get in there to the to this area and make some money,

Tony Chvala-Smith 38:03

Not once but twice!

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 38:07

Ouch. Yeah, he's not only saving his own height, he's also making money off of this, there have been people who've talked about Abraham pimping out Samuraim to, you know, for his own benefit. So I mean, there's, there's this part to think about, we have Sariah, who doesn't trust God. And when the angels the manifestation of God comes to her 10th and says, you're gonna, you know, by this time next year, you're gonna have a kid, she laughs and that's how much she doesn't trust. Right? Aha, cuz she's

really old by this point. And she laughs about this promise, she, she has tried to make something happen. She doesn't trust God. So she tries to make this thing happen with Abraham and her Egyptian slave Hagar. And depending on which story, either Hagar does become a wife, or one of the other traditions, has her still kind of as a concubine, and still as Sariah's slave. So there's, it's not certain that she moved up very much, Hagar. So her, as Tony mentioned, her hope is that if Hagar gets pregnant, she can become a mother in this way that she would have this child then. But then Hagar once she's pregnant, it's like, Ha, ha, ha. You know, I'm better than you are. I in the eyes of many will see as be seen as one that God's blessed. And what does that make you? This whole idea of looking at with contempt. I mean, she shaped by this culture that says, having children bearing children is a pretty big thing. thing. And so, you know, she's kind of feeling her Wheaties a bit and feeling like I'm pretty cool. And yes, and she's cruel to Sariah. And in response, Sariah, cruel to her. And so much so that Hagar runs away. Now, as a slave, she has not no choices, but very few choices, and they're not good. And so one of them, which is like a extreme last resort, is to run away. But of course, there are laws that could have made her life even more difficult if she were caught. So, so there's all of these negative aspects of these people. They're not, you know, that you're not particularly compassionate or responsible people to each other.

Karin Peter 40:52

And none of them are looking like people I want to be friends with. But on the other hand, they're looking a lot like all the people that I know. I don't know what that says.

Tony Chvala-Smith 41:04

These are people you unfollowed on Facebook.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 41:10

Exactly. And, and we need to go there, we need to let these these characters be people, because that's the purpose of the story. That's the purpose of the storyteller is to help people see themselves in the story of the story of God. And this leaves some really pretty wide doorways, you know, if they can make it through into the storyline, there might be room for me to. But then let's, let's take a look, I'm on the more on the heart side of each of these characters. And again, we may see ourselves somewhere, there not just in the, the mean side, the nasty side of people. So, so here's Sarai, or Sarah, depending on which part of the story you're in. She's barren, she has not had children in a culture, where the first expectation is that women will provide children and survival for the family. That's, that's your retirement program, is that you have children, who will then house you and take care of you and your old age. But it's also about bringing status. And in this throughout the story, Abrams, like God, I'm going to be, you know, who's going to be inheriting all my cattle, and you know, all of my servants and all of this. It's a slave from from Damascus, he's not even from my own people. And so there's this really strong need to have an heir, to have someone who will carry on, and, again, be that safety net. And so Sarai is trying to make sense of this. And so, as we were talking about, you know, God has prevented me from having children, what a, what a thing to have to live with, right? The sense that somehow this thing that I want, God is keeping it from me. And that's, that's a very, very difficult thing to bear them, or now. But I hope we have other options, as far as how to what we apply that why we think that happens. And, you know, you can, in this culture, too, if things weren't working out for you, and and especially if you're a woman and not didn't have a child, it's like, a punishment from God. I mean, this is what the other women are

saying, right kind of behind their hand. I wonder what she did? Or maybe it's Abraham, or Abraham, you know, whichever part of the story and what did he do? Maybe it's his fault, that they're being punished. And so you're carrying around this awareness of how other people see your situation, not with compassion, maybe some did, but often with judgment. And, you know, if you think about Sarah's situation, she's finally old enough for no one to expect that she's going to have a child, she can leave all of that baggage behind all that shame and guilt that's been placed on her through her life. It's like, I'm past the, the manner of women when she's when she just

Tony Chvala-Smith 44:39

Ceased to be with her after the manner of women.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 44:42

Thank you.

Tony Chvala-Smith 44:43

Very memorable text in the Bible.

Karin Peter 44:46

She's in the hot flash stage. She's gone over that line.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 44:51

And then she's not only just done with the physical stuff, she's done with people's expectations that somehow she should still produce offspring for Abram. And you know, they, from what we can kind of piece together, they probably grew up together. One of the reasons he justifies calling, Abram calls Sarai sister is because they have the same father, but different mothers. And they've grown up together. And so she's had, she's, her life has been revolving around Abraham or Abram, here she is at a point in her life, where all of that shame can be let go of. And then she gets this message, she and Abraham, but God is going to give them a child that she's going to have a child, that's like, no, don't bring that back on me, you start to begin to get a sense of how, how devastating parts of her life have been, and how much how much subtle trauma there has been related to her identity as a woman, and unable to to have a child. And this promise was made, and then there's decades where nothing happens. And so it's no wonder she laughed, and it's no wonder she's not quite sure how to trust. So you know, here she is, she's she's made this thing happen, that she thinks is going to fix the problem, God's promise, and I'm not having children. And so she suggests the situation, and things, her plan works. But she ends up being even more hurt by it, because now her slave girl is like, nananananana, I'm better than you. And again, all of it's like shame three times over now, it's been multiplied and heaped on her intentionally out loud by Hagar. So you begin to see why she reacted so violently towards what Hagar is doing. This is known as Hagar, she's an Egyptian slave, she has very few choices, someone has benefited by selling her, I think that's always really important to understand that she probably had no say in any of this, someone benefited by the bad situation that she is in. And she stuck with that. Her only choice is to stay. And in this conflict with samurai, either to be stay and be dehumanized or run. And she has no say in me think back, she has no say in whether or not she's married to Abraham. She has no say in whether or not she's going to have sex with a from start to start thinking about that these are these are cultural norms that she has no control over. So, but then

something good happens, you know, she is pregnant. And she's having a child of someone who's fairly upstanding in the, in the culture, who has, you know, herds and servants and, and not property yet, but, but has these things that are valued. And she can see herself rising above the situation in which she was. And so her sense of value and worth is rising. Of course, she's stepping on Sariah on her way up. But you know, she's probably a young woman who saw before her a really dark path, especially if Sariah was a little Moody, at times, and, and now things are looking very good. So we can't, we can't really blame her for being kind of excited and like, oh, there's somebody below me. For the first time in her life. She's relishing this new situation. And when there's an Abram, Abraham, I can just imagine him going, what's happening. And, you know, apparently, in the story he has been I won't I don't want to use the word faithful to Sarai, but he hasn't looked for other ways of having offspring. It's like this never occurred to him. Until sir I says it because there's this kind of story that if there were other stories of him having offspring somewhere. They would have shown up because the author would want you to know that. But But, you know, Sarai makes a suggestion and he doesn't just disagree with it. He doesn't say, Oh, no, maybe that's not a good idea. He's He's quite happy to, to have Hagar there as, as a whatever. You know, whether it's wife, whether it's concubine, he doesn't, he like he's willing to go along with surprise suggestion. And then he's stuck in this spot. Like, what? It's my fault? I just did what you said, you know.

Karin Peter 50:42

My God, we're back to Adam. I mean, this is a reoccurring theme in Genesis with the male... (laughter)

Tony Chvala-Smith 50:50

(laughter) And so it begins.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 50:57

On and on and on. Yeah. So we get a sense of his situation, as well. And, you know, he's trying to figure out what's trust me, in this, this is how this is all messed up. And everything seems to be flying apart at the seams. And so we get, we're just getting, I just want to get us inside of the people, and what their culture would be saying to them, and what just the basics of human under self understanding and relationships would be so that we get, we can start to be compassionate towards these people in all of their messiness. Let's move on into how, how can we take the story, and in a Bible study kind of way, let it ask us some questions in our own lives. And they might be the different questions. Then Hagar had to face or that sir, I had to face or Abraham, but maybe they aren't either. Just to remind her that our approach to the Bible study is that we're trying to humanize the writers and the characters. And so we can hear their story and see if there's some parts of their story that fit for us. We know some people who will be listening to this or watching this, have had to put scripture on the shelf, because they've been abused by it. And they've needed to do that, to to be safe, and have room for healing. And so when we are coming into this, we want to give you the whole landscape so that if there's like landmines, you can see where they are, and avoid them or say this isn't a safe place to go. So that's kind of how we approach the Bible study part. We just first of all want to say it looks as though we're we're picking the most disturbing texts that we can find. And that's not the case. But we're not going to avoid them either. Because we want to take an honest look at the complexities of these characters, and what the author is trying to say about humanity and about God. And so our first question is that, God? Well, I think one of the ways to think about it, is that in this story, character of God, in here it is about

the pattern, there's a pattern in the story, and it is that God remains. God reminds that the promise is still out there. God reprimands or brings them back to remembering. And then God remains. And it's this cycle of this relationship with Sariah, and Hagar and Abraham. And so this is my first question for you to think about personally. And if you're a journaler, maybe to take a little bit of time, and after this podcast and and just reflect on these questions, but the first one is, God remains present and active in the midst of all of this family's dysfunction. Where have I seen this to be true in my own life? Where has God remained with you, even when everything else is self destructing or imploding to just take some time to remember that it's part of this story and from for many of us, it's part of our story as well and one worth recalling. So, when we think about Sara's, Sarai's questions to trust or not to trust. We can also ask ourselves, where may God be asking me to trust even though I have little evidence right now. And sometimes in our lives, we have those things we sense God calling us to or inviting us to. But we can't see it yet. And we're not sure whether to even trust what we're hearing. And so I'm just inviting us to attune to those places where we may be sensing God asking us to trust in some part of our life, that that is has yet to unfold into reality. That's the second invitation. And then the third one comes from the reality that these were not perfect people. And oh, and one of the things I've been skipping through my notes, is that a really amazing thing in this story is that God covenants with each one of them. We tend to think of the covenants of the Abrahamic covenant in the Mosaic covenant and the Davidic Covenant, and these are all men, right? Well, these covenants are made. Yes, Abraham and Sarah, Sarai. And, and these covenants eventually do happen for both of them. Sarai's really concerned that it's only going to happen for Abraham, and Hagar, but that she's going to be left out. But it does eventually happen for her. So the covenant is for her, and for Abraham. And then in this story, Hagar, the slave, the Egyptian slave, the foreigner, the outsider, she God covenants with her two times, assuring her that she would be the one who would have a multitude of offspring. So what can it mean to me, that God covenant was imperfect people, assuming that whoever the me is recognizes they're not perfect. There's a few people out there who have a problem with that, but most of us know that we're imperfect. And that is our invitation to be reminded that God knows how to covenant with us. So this is that last piece that Tony was talking about that passage.

Tony Chvala-Smith 57:27

Back to the back to the Hagar texts in 16. Yeah, she she has run away from her mistress. And, like Charmaine says she has, she has no options really. But she encounters God in the desert. And this is a this is just an incredible text here. 16, Chapter 16, verses 13 to 14. It says, So Hagar named the Lord who spoke to her. You are El Roi, for she said, I really have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him. The feminist readers of the Hebrew Bible have pointed out, long pointed out, this is a remarkable text, it's the one place we can find in the Hebrew Bible, where a female character actually names God. And what Hagar names God is God who sees, God, the seer. Therefore, the text was on there for the well she's at a well out in the desert, the well was called lahai-roi. It lies between Kadesh and Bered. So there's this well out in the desert, called lahai-roi. And literally what that means in Hebrew is, well, of the living one who sees me. I just love that well of the living one who sees me. It's not a great name for a town, because it's kind of long. And I'm not sure how you would name their football team. But it's, it's a really, it's a really cool thing, well of the living one who sees me. And so one final thing we can learn from this text is that the text is trying to say that God sees the people who are deemed insignificant who are dismissed, who are discarded. This discarded woman and her child God sees them. And so this text in Genesis about a slave woman who is pushed out, actually prepares

readers and hearers of the whole saga of the Torah for a distant time when the descendants of Abraham and Sarah are slaves in Egypt. And God's still proves there to be a God of seeing, quote, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt, I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know they're suffering" That's in Exodus three. In other words, Hagar is experienced at this well, and of a God who sees an of being seen, actually points us ahead to another group of slaves of Abraham and Sarah's children will become slaves, and God will see them. So Hagar gets to name one of the things that is most true in the Hebrew Bible of God, that God sees the marginalized and disenfranchised, and is trying to act on their behalf.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:00:39

And this is one of the things that goes throughout these stories, that God sees the situation of the dismissed and the disenfranchised. And so in each of these Bible studies, we'll have a walking with question. And it's a challenge to let this passage work in you in this coming week. So where in the coming week, can I help someone who is often ignored, know that they are seen? And I'd invite you to, to commit to first being open perfectly open to who it is that may need to be seen, and then second, to act on that. So thank you.

Karin Peter 1:01:20

Well, thank you, Tony and Charmaine for unraveling this knot of relationships that we find here in Genesis 15-16, and 21, in the ancestral saga. So do we have any last thoughts or comments before we close out our episode?

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:01:37

Well, I have one, and that is that these stories in the ancestral saga think of this is as a way away, the Holy Spirit is giving us permission not to be ashamed of our humanity.

Karin Peter 1:01:53

That's, that's a great sentiment to close this particular episode with. And so with that our ancestral saga episode is coming to a close. And we hope our listeners will join us for episode three, which is Moses unwilling Liberator, unappreciated leader. And we look forward to that discussion as well. In the meantime, keeping in mind the events we've just learned about with Abraham, Sarah and Hagar. We will leave you with this comment from preacher, poet and theologian Frederick, and I think it's Buechner. So this is the sentence that caught my attention, in reference to Abraham, Sarah and Hagar. "It suddenly dawned on them that the wildest dreams they'd ever had, hadn't been wild enough." So until next time, this has been He'brew with Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith. I'm Karin Peter Project Zion Podcast. Thanks for listening.

Josh Mangelson 1:03:09

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