

The Abraham Narrative
Faithful or Fearful?

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Introduction

My first true encounter with narrative criticism of the Bible came unexpectedly years ago. At the time I would not have called it narrative criticism, but rather a philosophical and creative reframing of a classic story of faith. In Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, he begins with several retellings of the story of Abraham on the road to sacrifice his son Isaac. Each retelling opens the reader to a different paradoxical concept of what it means to live a life of faith.

However, the narrative that Gunn and Fewell write more closely aligns with Kierkegaard's *Exodium III* in which Abraham is faced with the horror of the action he is about to commit. "...he rode to Mount Moriah; he threw himself down on his face, he prayed God to forgive him his sin, that he had been willing to sacrifice Isaac, that the father had forgotten his duty to his son."¹ Gunn and Fewell see the Isaac story in relation to the entirety of Abram's story, going back to Genesis chapter 11. In their narrative, Abraham is not a great man of faith like described in Hebrews 11. Instead, Abraham is driven by his desire to survive, create wealth, and, in the end, build his own nation.

Great Contradictions

Gunn and Fewell open their narrative by pointing out the most common interpretation of the Abraham and Isaac story. Abraham, a towering example of faith in God, leaned on the promise of becoming a great nation throughout his long life. While he and his wife Sarah made mistakes along the way, it was still his faith that prevailed in the end, even going so far as offering his only son when commanded to do so. Gunn and Fewell argue that, if the entire story

¹ Kierkegaard, Søren, et al. *Fear and Trembling: Repetition*. Princeton University Press, 1992. 13.

of Abraham and Sarah is read, then the faithfulness of Abraham is tainted. Instead, Abraham is motivated by self-preservation.

Abram uses Sarai three times as a bargaining chip and a sacrifice for his own safety. Each time Abram (and Abraham after his name change) gives his wife to the rulers of the lands out of fear for his life. In all three cases, Sarah is returned to her husband with wealth and livestock. As Gunn and Fewell note, “In Abraham’s point of view, Sarah continues to be dispensable, especially when his security is at stake. And as for Sarah, she allows herself... to be sacrificed for the safety of the ‘chosen one’”.²

After reading this narrative, I have two questions. First, was this story originally a warning for those who would go against their own family to secure personal security? If this is true, how did the interpretation change by the time the writer of Hebrews included Abraham in the ‘hall of faith’?

The Family Dynamic

Family structure was important to the Hebrew people. The genealogies serve to remind the people that they are chosen from generations before as well as uniting the people as a singular unit. This patriarchal structure places Lot and his safety over that of Sarai. Gunn and Fewell question Abram’s actions during this part of the story. Considering Abram’s sudden denial of the king of Sodom’s trade, they question, “Where was such pride when Abram was in Egypt? He certainly had no qualms about Pharaoh’s sandal straps.”³

² Gunn, D., and Danna Fewell. *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*. Oxford University Press, 1993. 96.

³ Gunn and Fewell, 93.

It appears that Abram's hierarchy of values equate Sarai and wealth equally. When Abram was afraid for his life, he used Sarai as a bartering chip to secure safety and wealth. However, when Lot is captured, a real threat to Abram, he is unwilling to trade his nephew for wealth (Gen. 14:21-23). Lot is not seen as a possession, where Sarai is. Even with the promise of God, Abram devalues Sarai, equating her to cattle.

Sarai becomes worried that she will not be able to conceive and offers her servant Hagar as - to put it charitably - a surrogate. Ishmael is now Abraham's chosen son and Sarah is devalued again. Once Sarah learns of the promise God made to her family, she conceives and has Isaac. Sarah becomes defensive and suspicious of Hagar and Ishamel and wants them cast out. Gunn and Fewell note the troubling notion that God plays favorites, however they pose a question to consider: maybe God allows the split to avert a worse conflict later on.⁴ We can assume the writer wants the reader to remember the first murder that was due to familial jealousy.

Who is Faithful in Hebrews?

My final question comes when the writer of Hebrews uses Abraham and Sarah as examples of faith. They are included with Abel, whose gift was given in faith. Enoch and Noah had faith that saved them from death. The writer includes many of the lineage of the Jewish people, including Moses, his parents, Joshua, Joseph, and many others too numerous to recount (Heb. 11:32).

What many of these heroes of faith have in common is their profound periods of unfaithfulness. Moses killed an Egyptian and the people of Israel, after crossing the Red Sea, set

⁴ Gunn and Fewell, 97.

up an idol. Samson is betrayed by Delilah and David sends Bathseba's husband to die in war so he can take her as his own. These men are hardly ambassadors of utmost faithfulness and seemingly devalue the faithful accounts of Abel, Enoch, and the others.

Instead, I think the faithfulness shown in the great men of Hebrews is the faithfulness of *God*. While these men fail to stay true to God, God is always faithful to them. "Every act of familiar sacrifice performed by Abraham has been met with God's intervention."⁵ God is able to make the best of each terrible decision made by humanity. God's promise does not change when the other side of the covenant is broken. I think the inclusion of Abraham, Sarah, and other unfaithful characters, shows that God is faithful regardless of the actions we choose.

The Other Narrative

Gunn and Fewell force us to read the Abraham story much differently. Abraham is not a faithful giant, but a wavering coward. When Abraham brought Isaac to the mountain, was it a dutiful follower of the True God or a scared man with a backup plan in Ishmael? "What if the test is really designed to see just how far Abraham will go?... If Abraham refuses to do this thing, what will happen to him?... Abraham, as we have seen, is rather sensitive when it comes to his personal safety."⁶

In spite of his continual unfaithfulness to the plan of God, his preferential treatment of men and the disregard of Sarah and Hagar, God is faithful to the promise made. It is God's faithfulness alone that gives the Israelites a great nation. God works overtime to continue to bless those who are unworthy and protect those who are in need. This is the other narrative of Abraham and Issaac. This is the narrative that continues through the work of Jesus.

⁵ Gunn and Fewell, 99.

⁶ Gunn and Fewell, 98.

Bibliography

Gunn, D., and Danna Fewell. *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*. Oxford University Press, 1993.

Kierkegaard, Søren, et al. *Fear and Trembling: Repetition*. Princeton University Press, 1992.