

Being Church for The World— When World and Church Do Not Know What To Do With Each Other

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Short Introduction

Wouldn't it be great if any of us had a recipe that worked and could easily be put to good use here? That person —any of us— would be a hero. Although I am sure it is not Bishop Brian's or the Synod's way to worship a single human hero, it has been and it still is part of the dream of many to resort to individualistic and messianic (hoped for) solutions; most Hollywood heroes (usually tough men) fit this pattern. I catch myself from time to time wishing I had the solution, I would bring you brilliant ideas to have

¹ Guillermo Hansen, *En las fisuras. Esbozos luteranos para nuestro tiempo* (Buenos Aires: Iglesia Evangélica Luterana Unida, 2010),
.....

our churches blossom again. Yet, that's Satan tempting me. No solution comes from only one man or woman. Not even God could bring about salvation to God's people without Moses', Aaron's and Miriam's help (one of many examples we can think of). So Jesus gathered a group of men and women to preach his words and deeds and announce to the world that death has been defeated. Yes: "were you not to speak, these stones would speak up". Yet, God would still need those stones to witness to the gospel. So, if no individual solution is desirable, what can we do together?

¹ Guillermo Hansen, *En las fisuras. Esbozos luteranos para nuestro tiempo* (Buenos Aires: Iglesia Evangélica Luterana Unida, 2010),

I do not come from a megachurch, as those of you familiar with your companion church in Argentina and Uruguay know. Only in God's kingdom will my Lutheran Church in a Roman Catholic environment become a megachurch. We do not dream with being a megachurch. Rather, we embrace a place of comfort for those who seek a church that is different from others, Catholic, Protestant or Pentecostal. And let those who do not feel at home in a Lutheran setting, find God in a different one. As my colleague Guillermo Hansen, teaching now for a long time at Luther seminary states, ours is a place in the fissures—and fissures are never major.¹ Of course we share your concerns about survival and institutional feasibility and our own Institute that I coordinate would not survive were it not for Global Mission of the ELCA. But I feel it is

¹ Guillermo Hansen, *En las fisuras. Esbozos luteranos para nuestro tiempo* (Buenos Aires: Iglesia Evangélica Luterana Unida, 2010),

important for us to understand where I come from and where my church is going, lest you get disappointed at my lack of proposals for a goal that it is actually not ours.²

I do not come as an evangelist or a congregation starter. Rather, I come as a theologian who is seeking answers and probing theories and who, quite frankly, finds traditional worship very boring. My daily challenge is to bring God's word to people who believe in God, people who are no longer sure about God, people who believe the Bible is the word of God, people who understand the Bible to contain (not to be) the word of God, people who want the Church to be their refuge from change in a world they don't understand any longer, people who want the Church to be at the forefront of change, people who live by grace alone, people who measure others by deeds, people who worry about parsonage and sanctuary

² I have found some wonderful stories about small congregations in the ELCA. As I read them, I thought "That's what I was thinking of!". Here is one:

https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10156316245927382&set=a.1015041439521238_2&type=3&theater No place is too small for mission! No church is too small for miracles! No human being is too small for ministry!

roofs, people who worry about those expelled from conservative congregations because of their sexual orientation ... people like you and me! As Paul says in 1 Cor 9:23, “I do it all for the sake of the gospel.” I try to stir each one to think about their faith and beliefs and thus turn to God for companionship. How successful I am it is not for me to say. But I want to make very clear that I do not come to teach you, as if I knew the answers, but rather to share common concerns and some biblical wisdom, so that you are encouraged to find your answers at every small corner of Nebraska, wherever God is using your talents.

Word Search

I have to confess, at first I could not recite any biblical verse that would speak of “being church for the sake of the world.” Remember, I am a Hebrew Bible scholar, so I usually deal with texts about Yahweh-Israel and sometimes the other nations, but not the church. Then, slowly, our motto came to my mind, expressed in other words. For

instance, John tells us that Jesus spoke of himself as a gate through which the sheep come and find good pasture and safety:

I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. (John 10:9-10)

That we may have abundant life, that is the same as saying “church for the sake of the world”, is it not? Can the church be true to its mission and not be church for the sake

of the world? [Am I speaking of the Church of Christ or am I speaking of the ELCA, or IELU, my church body?]

As always when I have to speak about a new topic, I try to get the biblical panorama as clear as I can: are there biblical terms or stories that would help me with this issue?

What I share with you is my journey through some of those searches and what they awoke in me. You will find out that my presentation does not go straight from introduction to main theme to conclusion, so I will try to leave signposts for you to follow. Do not panic if you get lost: you will get someplace where, I hope, we will be nourished by God's word.

I found two Hebrew expressions meaning “for the sake of”. One of the words is not very well known, it is not among the 100 words you make your Hebrew students learn

by heart. It is *בְּעִבְרִית*, *ba`ăbûr*, with 49 appearances in the whole Hebrew Bible; the second one, *לְמַעַן*, *ləma`an*, appears 272 times.³ Anyway, you do not need to learn this!

What I found interesting about *ba`ăbûr* is that its first usage comes in Genesis 3. Can you guess when?

"Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,
and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You
shall not eat of it,'

cursed is the ground because of you;

in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and
thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the
plants of the field.

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you
return to the ground,

for out of it you were taken;

you are dust, and to dust you shall return." (Gen 3:17-19)

³ I am not sure what would be the difference between both, although I see that *ləma`an* appears often with the sense of “so that.”

⁴ Joseph Campbell, “The Impact of Science on Myth” (1966), as reprinted in his *Myths to Live By* (Foreword by Johnson E. Fairchild. Bantam Book/Viking Penguin, 1988), 14. <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/150888-myths-are-public-dreams-dreams-are-private-myths-we-must>.

Humankind and Life, Adam and Eve, are expelled from the garden, the snake is downgraded to an animal who no longer speaks nor walks, and the ground is cursed because of our very human desire to discern good and evil and to judge by ourselves; a divine prerogative. Myths, in the technical sense that scholars give to the term, are not lies. “Myths are public dreams, dreams are private myths,” said anthropologist Joseph Campbell.⁴ Even if they never occurred as such (they are located *in illu tempore*, before time, in an untraceable place, in this case the Garden of Eden, East of ...), they are true for us as well, as long as they tell us of our dreams. Our very human desire not to follow God’s rules but judge on our own enabled, on one hand, a land that would be tilled and produce vegetation (Genesis 2 starts with two “before,” before Yahweh

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poured rain and before humans tilled the ground) and, on the other hand, it brought God's first curse on the ground. It is not poured on Adam and Eve—only the first killer, Cain, will be cursed—but on the ground. We have to come to grips with the fact that the ground, from which we draw our food, is cursed because of humanity's desire to be like God/s. I have a hard time to take Genesis 3 as punishment for sin, since the wording is that related to wisdom literature, rather than law: "sin" will only appear as Cain considers to kill his brother Abel. Still, ancient Israelites tell us the ground yields thorns rather than wheat, and it is because it was cursed, and it was cursed because of us, humanity. So much for Church for the sake of the World's origins!

⁵ All biblical texts from NRSV unless otherwise stated.

⁶ Rabbinic literature often contrasts Noah and Moses. After deliverance from Egypt, what ended up being a lifetime journey of 40 years included many bitter moments, complaints, disobedience, disbelief, fire and plagues, and also—yes! again—God's decision to destroy God's people and start over with a new people. Unlike Noah, who made the ark and saved himself, his family, and a few animals with no

I Do Not Believe in ...

I do not believe that God is a “he” who needs nobody or nothing from us, alone and aloof. First, I don’t believe that is the biblical God Yahweh, who has engaged for millenia with creation, and who in these last days “has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things” (Heb 11:2); who chose to become one of us, to set a tent among us to teach us a new way of living, a new family configuration, the family of those mothers, brothers and sisters who do God’s will (Mk 3:31-35). It is part of God’s very nature to be a relational God. Is that not the idea of a Trinitarian God, a God who makes Godself manifest in creation, in redemption for the cosmos, and in a permanent dynamic force? True: Yahweh could be a relational Deity and still dispense with **us**.

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Actually, according to the Bible Yahweh had tried to destroy God's own creation and decided destruction is not the way. You probably recall the flood and Noah's ark. What people do not recall is that those events are part of God's plan to dispense with most of creation. First, God saw evil all around and was sorry:

The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created — people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD. (Gen 6:5-8)⁵

After the flood, though, God was sorry to have brought the earth to near annihilation and decided that destroying it and starting over with a new humanity was not the way either⁶:

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Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the LORD smelled the pleasing odor, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."
(Gen 8:20-22)

In this story, it is Noah's proper sacrifices, with their pleasing odor, which bring God to decide not to destroy the earth again. It is interesting, isn't it, that God keeps thinking humans are evil, no matter what? Before the flood, "the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually" (6:5) and after the flood "the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth" (8:21). Well, actually it is believers in Yahweh who think that God thinks that the whole humanity, they themselves and everybody else, is inclined to wickedness.

⁷ This is a red thread throughout the Bible; Psalms 14 and 53 (which Paul will also quote in Romans 3), for instance, read: "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they commit abominable acts; there is no one who does good. God looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. They have all fallen away, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one." (Psa 53:1-3).

It is Noah offering proper sacrifice, with its pleasing odor, what brings God to decide not to destroy the earth again. It is not the realization that punishment will make humans better persons; nor is it, as in other Ancient Near Eastern myths, that without humans the deities would have to do their household chores by themselves that moves God to keep the earth. Proper approach to Yahweh by humans is what seems to move God to desist from annihilation. Not only is important that God desisted from destroying the earth when the pleasing smell got to heaven, but also it is important that food is the means for restoring such a relationship. Food pervades the Bible from the bushes in Genesis 1 to the perennial trees in Revelation. Food not only makes life possible, but it also heals us or makes us sick; gladdens us or makes our day miserable; food hoarding is one of the sins the prophets condemn; water, bread and wine are the means God chose to come to us in the sacraments.

It belongs to being a Deity to receive due worship and loyalty from his or her followers, human and heavenly creatures alike. A God would not be a God without proper respect and recognition from heaven, earth and the underworld, the ancient Israelites believed. Psalm 6, for instance, has the worshipper claim for deliverance for the sake of Yahweh's praise:

Turn, O LORD, save my life;

regard for the rest of creation, Moses refused to play that game: “If you want to destroy your own people, you are a Deity powerful enough to do so, Yahweh, but don’t count on me for that! They are **your** children, and furthermore: What will the nations say? ‘He wasn’t able to make a people for himself and had to kill them in the wilderness!’” [my own wording, from several dialogues between Moses and Yahweh; *see, e.g.,*]. Forty years of intense living together was at times too much for that relationship between Yahweh with Israel. Everyone was sorry, everyone complained, everyone wanted a break from the others. Just like families do sometimes, don’t they?

deliver me for the sake of your steadfast love. For
in death there is no remembrance of you;
in Sheol who can give you praise? (Psalm 6:4-5).

Likewise, we learn in Paul's letter to the Philippians that, after his ignominious death God raised Jesus, exalted him, and gave him his due divine place through confession of his name and bending of every knee:

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave
him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee
should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and
every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:9-11).

The “therefore” with which these verses start refers to the first part of this baptismal hymn, which speaks of Jesus’ refusal to use his divine prerogatives for his own sake, but rather become a slave, obedient to the point of death on the cross. There is no need for the church in Paul’s times or today to teach Jesus to be obedient to God.

Philippians does not speak to Jesus but to us: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus..." Becoming a slave for the sake of our neighbor is a landmark of a church for the world.

Now, I see here a clue to our discussion. It is essential for God that God’s glory, God’s name, be properly recognized and praised. Israel built a whole system of regulations on proper sacrifice to ensure as much as possible the right relationship with Yahweh and also to prevent God from leaving their sanctuary because of improper human behavior. We often caricature this preoccupation as pharisaic hypocritical external observance. The classical prophets themselves saw this danger, of course:

What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah?

Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early.

Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets, I have killed them by the words of my mouth, and my judgment goes forth as the light.

For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. (Hos 6:4-6)

“Steadfast love rather than sacrifice”. Binary categories are problematic because they leave little room for grays, it is all black or white (and we all know that “black” and “white” are not equally desirable in our world: most binary pairs are hierarchical also). Were we to choose between mercy and sacrifice, it would be very easy. Yet, it is not “steadfast love, not sacrifice” but actually steadfast love to oneself and neighbor that

translates into genuine worship. This is the temptation, to empty worship from everyday life. “Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners,” Matthew reminds the church of his day and ours (Mt 9:13). Matthew is especially keen on showing a Jesus who lives what he teaches and expects his followers to do likewise. In Luther’s words,

This Son obeyed His Father's will, Was born of
virgin mother,
And God's good pleasure to fulfill,
He came to be my Brother.
No garb of pomp or power He wore, A servant's
form, like mine, He bore, To lead the devil captive.⁸

Is it solved today in our churches? What do you think? How do you think people foreign to church see us? Were they to judge us, where do you think our worship, our gatherings, ourselves would be set between these extremes of service to the neighbor and worship, between coherence and hypocrisy? I know I fall short of the mark!

⁸ Martin Luther, “Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice!,” stanza 6, <http://www.lutheran-hymnal.com/lyrics/tlh387.htm>

Seeing that destroying the earth would be of no avail because of constant wickedness on the side of humanity, God tries through a particular family. The Genesis story is fascinating, so far and so close to home, isn't it? At the end of chapter 11, we read that Abram's father, Terah, takes his family and leaves Ur of the Chaldeans. Did Terah follow a call? We do not hear about it, but why not? Were they asylum-seekers trying to get through the fence? Nothing tells us whether they were poor fleeing from drought or war, or whether there was another reason for them to migrate. In Mesopotamia, most people were extremely poor and did not belong to the category of full citizens, with lesser rights than their landlords. If you notice, it is always poor, persecuted, and very vulnerable people that make up our migrants, etc. When rich people settle down somewhere else we welcome them and we call them "residents", "exchange scholars or students", "investors," "tourists," or something else but migrants or refugees.

Anyway. We do not know where did Terah want to settle. But it is in Haran where Yahweh calls Abram to another land, the land to be led into, Canaan. Abram was already a settler when he was called! As Abram stepped on Canaan he built altars to Yahweh where Yahweh appeared to him, from Shechem to Moreh, Bethel, Ai, and the Negeb. (Gen 12:6-9). As they reached Canaan, the land was dry and hungry, Sarai was still barren and how was God to bless the nations through Abram is a mystery. In terms of a good narrative, there is a lot of expectation, as once the promises are fulfilled, the story comes to “The End”. But there is no danger for now that the promises will be

⁸ Martin Luther, “Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice!,” stanza 6, <http://www.lutheran-hymnal.com/lyrics/tlh387.htm>

fulfilled and the story be finished. Right then, coming to the promised land, something happens that could change our faith story for ever. In view of the famine in the land, Abram (not God) decided to move on to Egypt and live there as an alien (the root used here, *gûr*, is used for people who are dwelling not on their inherited land, but somewhere else; for instance, an Ephraimite in Benjamin's land or abroad). A *gēr*, a "resident alien," had no rights and therefore no safety. Not to be a landowner meant a very vulnerable position; that is why Deuteronomy is so insistent on protecting the rights of widows and fatherless children, foreigners, and levites, all the groups without land backup. Much like so many immigrants today, even if laws protected them, they needed an extra hand from God in order not to perish on their way. And Israel did not forget that these were among the ones God cared for in a special way.

Now, we are about to enter Egypt with Abram as *gēr*. As they come to the border, however, Abram speaks to Sarai. For the first time, we witness Abram speaking to his wife. Now, what comes next is a story that Sunday school kids do not hear, thank God! It is a story, however, that many women have experienced in their own lives. The husband gives away his wife for other males to have sexual access to her, for profit or for fear.

... he said to his wife Sarai, "I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife'; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account." (Gen 12:11-13).

Indeed it went well with Abram:

When the officials of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, female donkeys, and camels. (verses 15-16)

Great plagues afflicted Egypt, which alerted Pharaoh that he had incurred in a serious sin, even if unintended by them. Pharaoh then confronted Abram with his lie, gave Sarai back to him, and had him, his family and possessions expelled from Egypt. This story is rehearsed again in a different scenario not long afterwards: Abraham has Sarah pass as his sister in Gerar and because of her beauty she is taken to king Abimelech. In this version, God warns the king by a dream not to take her and speaks of Abraham as a prophet of Yahweh on behalf of Abimelech (Genesis 20). Again, Abraham comes out of the story a much richer man!

This is the kind of story that makes us wonder about the sacred, the daily living of faithful people, the Bible as Word of God, and many other issues. Does the Bible approve of Abram's deed? The long list of heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11 includes him, but not this episode (and ignores Sarah or Hagar pretty much):

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old — and Sarah herself was barren — because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore." All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them. (vs. 8-16)

Often, biblical stories do not give us pre-digested food, but give us something to munch over, to swallow and to digest by ourselves. The narrator does not tell us “how badly Abram behaved toward Sarai”. But the narrator has Pharaoh, an imperial ruler (and oppressor of later generations) acting more righteously than the father of the promised people. “What did you do to me?” he reprimands Abraham. Abra(ha)m acted with no regard to his main wife’s wellbeing, putting her in danger for his own safety. Furthermore, he presupposed Egyptians were more barbaric and lawless than he himself: they would grab Saray to Pharaoh’s harem and kill him even knowing they were married. Well ... We could draw several teachings from this story; teachings about gender relations, about male responsibility in trafficking of women and children (not only Sarai is trafficked, there are several male and female slaves given from one male to another as part of the deal), and about labeling foreigners.

At this point, I would like to focus on how Abram put in danger every promise Yahweh had made to him: he left the promised land to turn to another land without any divine command to do so; he endangered at least Sarai's participation in the promise of a large family (before Genesis 18 neither Abram nor Sarai knew that the promise of an heir involved her besides Abraham). And not only did he endanger the possibility of channeling God's blessings for all the nations of the earth, but mocked it by having Yahweh send great plagues against every Egyptian!

Narratively, it is clear that these actions create suspense. Theologically, however, they posit several questions, particularly when that theology is gender-sensitive. Our personal and communal actions may turn into blessings for every nation, or they may, as in this story, bring plagues on others for actions they took out of a lie they were told by "the father of the faith!" How to be church for the sake of the world when we mistrust and misconstrue other peoples, and on that basis we save our skin with no regard even for the one who has become one flesh with us?

This same Abraham is, on the other side, the one who stands up to Yahweh and calls Yahweh to task when God confides him the test Sodom and Gomorrha are about to take:

Then Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Gen 18:23-25)

"For the sake of ten I will not destroy it," promises God finally. Here, in vs. 32 the same word *ba`ăbûr*, "for the sake of", is used with a more positive slant than earlier in humankind's relationship to Yahweh. We could debate whether 50—or 10—righteous persons living in the midst of an unrighteous people would count as *Church for the sake of the World*. I would push for a positive answer, even if "church" is anachronistic. It is righteous people living counter-cultural lives, living just and upright lives, for whose sake the world is not destroyed. Yes, we would miss their explicit confession of faith in the Righteous Judge and Savior, but to me they would have been church for the world. Unfortunately, as we know, God's messengers could not find even 10.

The Genesis stories are quite candid about our human nature. And it is not as if God didn't know, of course! And still, nevertheless, God chooses to remain committed to this relationship with humanity since Adam and Eve, and especially through Abraham's all descendants, from Sarah, from Hagar, and through Jesus. Is this commitment, this lovingkindness or solidarity, not enough for us to be church for the world?

Psalm 105

Before we move on, let us turn to one of the psalms that recall Israel's salvific history:

Psalm 105, a hymn of praise to Yahweh.⁹ The most important reason for the gathered community to praise Yahweh is the covenant made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and God's presence with Joseph and later with their descendants after the exodus.

Psalm 105

Verses 12-15 recount part of that story:

When they were still few in number,
not many, and sojourners there (in the land), and
still wandering from nation to nation, from one
kingdom to another,
he let no one oppress them, rebuked kings
for their sake.

⁹ The next psalm, Psalm 106, closes the fourth collection of the Psalter and takes up the same period as Psalm 105, but using other traditions, from Numbers. In Psalm 106, they are not interpreted for the sake of praise of the Divine. Despite the use of “Halleluyah!” at the beginning and end of the Psalm, interpretation serves a different purpose: confession of guilt, disobedience, on the part of Israel and a cry for mercy.

“Touch not my anointed ones; do no harm to my prophets!”

It is not the best-known version of the patriarchs’ and matriarchs’ wandering times. It recounts nothing of the struggle to make Isaac the chosen son over Ishmael, or of Isaac blessing Jacob over Esau, or Jacob’s flight to his uncle Laban’s household after stealing Esau from his birthright; or Jacob’s difficulties during those first years of his marriages to Leah and Rachel; or Joseph’s dreams. Yet, it includes some of the traditional motifs: the promised land, Israel being very small in number, and Yahweh’s protection of Abraham and his kin from powerful kings. At first sight, reference to Yahweh’s prophets seems out of the blue. Yet, it is a reference to our story in Genesis 20, I discovered reading this scholar:

Israel's ancestral parents are pictured, even if briefly, in vv. 12-15. Their small number is implicitly the topic of all the Genesis narratives (cf. Gen 12:2; 15:2-5); it is finally stressed in Exod 1:5 at the end of that period of “wanderings.” So we have a real retrospective evaluation of the “parents' stories” beginning with v. 12: a small group, the ancestors, “sojourned” in Canaan (*gār* with all its legal implications and in juxtaposition to “possessing” is the central concept of this period in Genesis; cf. Gen 12:10; 20:1, 23, 34; 26:3; 32:5; 35:27; 47:4; [...]). The psalmist then sweepingly states (at the same time summarizing and interpreting literary traditions) their unrestful destiny moving from “nation to nation” [...], emphasizing the special protection of Yahweh for his people (vv. 14-15). The first of these two lines probably refers to the salvation of Israel's ancestral mothers (cf. Fischer, *Die Erzeltern Israels*), significantly preceding protection for her menfolk (v. 15). Naming the fathers “anointed ones” and “prophets” also is an act of interpretation reverting, as it were, to Gen 20:7, where Abraham is called “prophet.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations* (Forms of OT Literature 15; Eerdmans, 2001), 231-232. According to Rabbinic tradition, Sarah was a much better prophet than Abraham, besides keeping her beauty (*Midrash Rabba: Genesis*, trans. Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman, New York: Soncino Press, 1939, I, 334-460; I thank my colleague María Roberto for this reference).

“An act of interpretation,” Gerstenberger says of the Psalm, and he is right. The Psalm takes up some traditions that were very dear to Israel and interprets them for the sake of praising Yahweh in the worshipping assembly because of the eternal covenant with Abraham and his family. And while I concur with his reading that the reference to “anointed ones” and “prophets” means “the fathers”, I wonder if the psalmist could not be thinking of the parents, Abraham and Sarah, rather than the fathers. The longer it takes for us to enlarge the biblical narratives to include people traditionally marginalized, the poorer our outreach will be. While our theologies see no shadow on Abraham, neither Sarah, nor Hagar, nor any of the other several wives Abraham had, or the other matriarchs, Rebecah, Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah, for that matter, are made a lively part of our narratives. About half of these named women were “surrogate mothers”—women taken to produce a son for their master, against their

wills, because slaves had no will of their own. Yet, our cloud of witnesses remembers Sarah, yes, but otherwise only Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, “heirs to the same promise”, according to Hebr 11:9. Our confessions of faith have more holes than content, have you realized? Or said in another, more academic way, they are so condensed that there are necessarily large lumps of history that are left out. Many women are left out. The vast majority of children are left out. Slaves, destitute, foreigners, “illegal people” (so to speak), weak, handicapped, and sick people are left out of our communal stories. A suspicious woman like Rahab is “improved” in Jesus’ genealogy by making her the mother of Boaz and therefore ancestor of king David and Jesus. An unschooled (and feeble) man like Peter is made Pope! But then, we find out that those most likely to identify with our stories, free, abled, strong heterosexual men (preferably with children, like the Genesis fathers) do not come to church! And we lament their absence, rather than striving toward a community that would reflect much more God’s care for the whole creation.¹¹

¹¹ In his book *Future Faith: Ten Challenges Reshaping Christianity in the 21st Century* (Word & World; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), ch. 2, Embracing the Color of the Future, our other guest speaker, Wesley Granberg-Michaelson challenges congregations in the United States to be more integrated in terms of skin color. I can only say “Amen” to that!

Can we survive as institution when we open our arms to poor people, immigrants, seasonal workers, prostituted women and children, victims of trafficking, addicts, single women, rather than wealthy upper- and middle-class men or families? Can we survive as Church when we seek financial security? Can we do both?

As you see, I bring more questions than answers.

Concluding—for now

I believe in a Deity who is powerful enough to blot out the whole universe and start over without us, yet chooses not to, and that is a deep commitment already! Yahweh made a covenant with Abraham and all his descendants, intending to channel blessings to all nations through the nations' dealings with Abraham and his descendants. Yet, God's people often bring destruction on others rather than God's favor. I believe in a Deity whose powerful status is beyond doubt, who nonetheless, out of compassion chooses the harder way of teaching us to live as brothers and sisters to our neighbors, who also spoke the last word against death by raising Jesus. I believe in a God who appears to humans in several ways, a male warrior, a female midwife, a father, a mother, a brother, a whisper, an extraordinary power, a mind beyond comprehension—above all, love and justice.

God's commitment to a relationship with creation through but not restricted to a chosen people is the reason for Paul's commitment to be weak with the weak and strong with the strong, for instance:

What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel. For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings. (1 Cor 9:18-23).

¹² Ruben Zimmermann, "Mission versus Ethics in 1 Corinthians 9? 'Implicit Ethics' as an Aid in Analysing New Testament Texts," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 68(1), Art. 1216 (2012), 8 pages, 1, 8, <http://www.hts.org.za>.

We know that for Paul and his daughter congregation in Corinth not only what was preached but how they lived was very important. We learn that Paul had been accused of hypocrisy because he did not behave in the same way when he was with Jews or with non-Jews. And he defends this apparent discrepancy in his behavior for the sake of making the Gospel acceptable to his interlocutors: to the Jews, Jew, to the weak, weak.

The question remains, how do mission and ethics belong together? Is there any connection at all? Is it the Christians' different way of life, which convinces the outside world more than missionary preaching? Or does Paul simply want to clarify ethical problems within the community itself, having no interest in doing missionary work with an ethical conception? In other words: Can one say that ethics is something for the inner circle of the church, whereas mission, by contrast, is addressed to the outside world? [...] Mission and ethics are not two realms of conduct that are to be divided as to their content or substance. Ethics [...] attempts to elucidate the behavioural reasons, norms and arguments that constitute the implicit Pauline theory of conduct. When the reflection concerns mission, then the ethical analysis serves to deepen the understanding of Paul's mission theology. Therefore, we should not speak of 'ethics versus mission' but can better grasp the 'ethics of mission'.¹²

¹² Ruben Zimmermann, "Mission versus Ethics in 1 Corinthians 9? 'Implicit Ethics' as an Aid in Analysing New Testament Texts," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 68(1), Art. 1216 (2012), 8 pages, 1, 8, <http://www.hts.org.za>.

Paul's ethics are contextual, are determined by customary behavior and common sense, by Torah, by his view of Jesus' salvation, and by his missionary zeal: Is it not customary for priests and other workers to earn their salary from their work?

Answer: Yes, it is. Yet, Paul chooses not to use his right, because of his freedom as a Christian. He would have his hands tied otherwise. And his only Lord is the One who called him from heaven, God, made man in Jesus. Yet, as Luther so well understood, Paul—any Christian—is at the same time servant to everyone for the sake of the Gospel. Mission, then, cannot be separated from the reflection on how we behave, ethics. And by definition, ethics is not a fixed set of rules to be followed, but it is reflection on what is good, what is advisable, what is possible even.

We live in a world that does not know what to do with church, and we live in a church that does not know what to do with the world. Tomorrow we will try to find some clues for our ministry on this complex situation we are in.