

Stephen G. Hyde  
Ravensworth Baptist Church  
March 4, 2007

Genesis 15:1-2, 17-18  
Philippians 3:17-4:1  
Luke 13:31-35

## CANAANITES, JEBUSITES AND JERUSALEM

In the summer of 2002, I reluctantly decided to preach a few sermons out of the lectionary texts in Genesis. Looking back now, I realize the outcome might have been different for me if I had not studied the stories of the triangle between Abraham, his wife Sarah and her slave-girl Hagar. Abraham and Sarah had lived a long time with the disappointment of not having a child, and the hurt was deepened by their memory of a promise that they would have more descendants than there were stars in the sky.

One day Sarah—who felt the clock ticking and knew she and her husband were not getting any younger—told Abraham to take Hagar so they would at least have a child. This was a commonly accepted practice in their day and would remove some of the stigma from Sarah. Then Sarah got pregnant, and part of the story is how these two women, Sarah and Hagar, came to despise each other. Sarah snapped one day when she saw the two boys playing—her son, Isaac, and Hagar’s son, Ishmael...both the sons of Abraham. The literal meaning of the word in this story is that little Ishmael was making little Isaac laugh.

It’s the sound of the boys’ squeals and laughter at play which pushes Sarah over the edge. You can hear her rage in this story as she pulls rank, stomps her feet and demands that Abraham cast the woman and the boy out of their household...which means putting them out in the desert. *“The matter was very distressing to Abraham,”* it says in Genesis, *“on account of his son.”*

*“But God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed because of the boy...I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.”*

The little boys grew—Ishmael in the desert, Isaac in the household of Abraham. And one day God wakes Abraham early in the morning and says: *“Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will show you.”*

For the first time—in the summer of 2002—I read this story and thought: ***“Wait a minute! What about Ishmael?”***

In the story of Abraham, under pressure, kicking Hagar and Ishmael out of the house, God acknowledges that Ishmael is the offspring of Abraham.

Yet—in the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac, it’s as if Ishmael never existed: *“Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah...to one of the mountains that I will show you.”*

The land of Moriah would later become Jerusalem, and the mountain which Abraham would climb with his unsuspecting son, Isaac, is considered to be Mount Moriah—now in Jerusalem. Not only that, but Solomon’s temple was later built, and Herod’s temple of the first century was expanded on what had become the holiest site for the Hebrew people—the spot where Abraham raised his knife over the body of his son, Isaac.

The holiest site for Muslims is the Ka’aba in Mecca. It’s the destination for the pilgrimage **every Muslim makes at least once in a lifetime**. The Ka’aba was an ancient shrine in the time of Muhammed. In fact, **it’s believed** that when Abraham cast Hagar and their son Ishmael out, he took them to the valley of Mecca

**Comment [gsk1]:** Believed by whom?

and abandoned them there. Later, the tradition says... Abraham visited Ishmael in Mecca and together they built the Ka'aba, the first temple of God in Arabia.

**Comment [gsk2]:** Did you know that popular Muslim traditions claim that the area of the Ka'aba is where Adam and Eve strolled – the place of the beginning of mankind?

There are so many layers to Jerusalem that make it the most complicated city in the world. The only surviving section of Herod's temple where so many of the stories of Jesus' last week took place... is a portion of the western wall which was not leveled to the ground by the Romans in the year 70--known now as the Wailing Wall.

**Comment [gsk3]:** Again, are you aware of popular Muslim narratives of history which claim that the Western Wall has nothing to do with any temple at all; that it is a Jewish story that dates to a much later time than appearance of Islam? And did you know that according to popular Muslim belief, the temple was built AFTER Islam existed? See the story I sent you

Just above the western wall is the Dome of the Rock, the mosque which was built on top of the ruins of the Jewish Temple... the mosque now considered one of the holiest sites in Islam. And of course, the Temple Mount in the heart of Jerusalem's old city is also a holy place to Christians around the world.

**Comment [gsk4]:** Again, ask your Muslim friends what do the Muslim popular/Imams/tradition belief regarding what's under the area of the Al Aqsa Mosque....

In the summer of 2002, I also noticed for the first time how Genesis tells the story of Abraham's death and burial: "*Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah.*"

So the two brothers come together for the burial of their father, Abraham. How strange it is that today, Mount Moriah in Jerusalem is like a magnet for all the troubled children of Abraham—Jews, Christians and Muslims. The playing together as children, making each other laugh, is an ancient memory long forgotten. The sad truth is that for most of the time, the memory of being children together as brothers--sons of a common father--has been forgotten.

But Jerusalem is even more complicated than that, and now almost five years after the summer of 2002, I read the Genesis text of the covenant between God and Abraham. God says: "*To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites...*" and as I wondered five years ago "*What about Ishmael?*"... it hits me now: "*Wait a minute! What about the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Jebusites and all the others?*"

My curiosity led me to some reading about ancient civilizations in Mesopotamia out of which Abraham came—as he left Ur with his father and brother and settled in Haran... and then left his family to follow the strange call of this God. Abraham's ancient footprints are all over where we now fight our war. But most striking of all is that these civilizations had been developing 1000 years before Abraham, and another 700 years after Abraham before the Hebrews left Egypt on their quest. Abraham did not walk just through desert, but around established cities, some of them large cities with amazing technology and bustling with life.

The history of the Canaanites is rich and colorful. When Abraham was making his travels, the city of Jericho was 6000 years old!

**Comment [gsk5]:** According to whom?

When King David decided to make Jerusalem his capital city, the Jebusites lived there. No one can take a land and claim it as their own without displacing someone else.

**Comment [gsk6]:** The story of the island of Mauritius is telling a different tale: that the island was totally empty, unsettled, when the French found it and settled it. There may be other places like that.

I'll never forget an early evening in Jerusalem, as our group searched a street behind the Italian Embassy for the home of Ghassan Tarazi's family. It's the home where GJ would have grown up... within walking distance of Mt. Moriah. The city of the Jebusites... the home of King David... the city which was home to the Temple, the destination of centuries of Jewish pilgrims who traveled with a love for God in their hearts and a burning desire to worship God in Jerusalem's Temple.

The holiest city in the world would have been GJ's home.

But he was born in 1948, a year of war and displacement.

GJ's family left the city and never saw their home again. His father still has the deed to the property, for their home was never sold.

It was taken.

GJ is a descendant of Hagar and Ishmael. Just as not all descendants of Abraham are Jewish, not all the children of Ishmael are Muslim. Mitri Raheb and so many of the Christian friends we met in Bethlehem are descendants of Hagar and Ishmael.

Jerusalem is a city with so many layers we could never dig all the way to the bottom.

And it's to this city that Jesus says: "*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!*"

Prophets speak truth to power. We can argue about how the historical Jesus saw himself, but clearly he stands in the Way of prophets like Jeremiah who 600 years before Jesus was born stood in the temple and shouted: "*You have made the house of God a den of robbers!*"

Jesus says in our text: "*Today, tomorrow and the next day I must be on my way, because it is unthinkable for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.*"

Earlier in our text some Pharisees came to warn Jesus that he was in danger. Now there goes a stereotype out the window! Some Pharisees warned Jesus to get away, because Herod wanted to kill him.

Herod Antipas, one of Herod the Great's three sons who inherited Galilee when his father died; Herod, who wakes up every morning wondering what he can do that day to keep Rome happy... Herod, who beheaded Jesus' friend and mentor, John the Baptist, has heard of Jesus' ministry and smells a threat to his power.

In my more pious moments, I'd say my favorite words of Jesus are the Sermon on the Mount, the Parables of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. But the truth is I love Jesus' response to the Pharisees when they warn him that Herod is watching: "*Go and tell **that fox** for me...*"

You can't be a prophet without some spunk, and Jesus is not afraid of Herod. A prophet will sooner or later offend everyone, because there is so much guilt... layers of guilt as complicated as the history of Jerusalem. I don't recall ever hearing an American Presidential candidate talking about all the people we displaced in order to become the most powerful nation in the world.

When were American Indians on a political platform?

There is shame in our story as there is in Jerusalem's. Our ancestors--not so terribly long ago--accepted the delivery of Africans who were forcibly removed from their own land to work this land of ours so it would prosper. By the time of the American Revolution, slavery had become an "indispensable" pillar of the economy. Even our forefathers who were deeply disturbed by slavery could not deny that to face the guilt and do what was right would shatter the new experiment in democracy before it could get on its feet.

So what happens when prophets speak truth to power?

Jesus does a remarkable thing when he speaks to Jerusalem. Within the same text, Jesus with his eyes blazing calls Herod a fox, then looks toward Jerusalem and his heart melts. He uses as soft and feminine an image as you can imagine: “*Jerusalem, Jerusalem...how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*”

We know who wins when a fox gets in the henhouse.

Unless...the One who desires to nurture the children of Isaac and Ishmael like a mother hen is the prophet **and** the Son who lays down his life outside the gates of the old city of Jerusalem. Even when it looks as if the fox has won, and there is nothing to be done in the face of such power...Jesus is showing us another Way.

There is time yet, if we who are followers of the Way of Jesus can hear the desire of his heart, a desire which lives to this day: “*How often have I desired to gather your children together.*”

Here is the vision of Christ Who lives among us now in the Spirit—to dig all the way down through all the layers of guilt and shame; to dig all the way down and gather together all the children of the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Jebusites; to dig all the way down and gather all the children of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac...to dig all the way down and gather all the children of Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael.

There is nothing more important for us to hear on this second Sunday in Lent than the desires in the heart of Jesus, and there is nothing more important for us to do than to follow him to Jerusalem...and to do all we can to bring together **God’s children**.

Amen.

**Comment [gsk7]:** Doesn't God's children include all the people in the world? You may find lots of wisdom in Jewish scholarship on many of the points mentioned here. You asked to spread the story to Imams and Rabbis. Why don't you find a serious Rabbi and ask for his comments and insights on this. And for that matter, find a serious Iman that speaks the truth and ask him for how the story told here meets his the belief of billion of Muslims... If you'd like, I don't mind meeting with this Rev. Steve Hyde