

Tale of two brothers

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Whenever a fairy tale begins with “Once upon a time, there were three brothers,” we anticipate that the older brothers are oafs and the younger will be unexpectedly successful. The Bible is the greatest of the “fairy tales,” as well as the history of “brothers,” especially of two men—the first man and the Last Man, the older brother and the younger, Adam and Jesus.

The Bible repeatedly anticipates this surprising reversal. Cain the elder is a fratricide forced to wander; Abel, the prototypical sacrificial victim. Esau serves the younger Jacob; Joseph’s brothers bow to Jacob. David is the youngest of Jesse’s sons; Solomon comes to the throne after several of his brothers have failed. (The most detailed study is Frederick Greenspahn’s *When Brothers Dwell Together*.)

When Abram gets impatient for a son, he fathers a son with his maidservant Hagar (Gen. 16:1-14). Ishmael is the first-born of Abraham, but the younger son, Isaac, carries the promise (Gen. 17). Yahweh blesses Ishmael, but makes him subordinate to his younger brother (see Gen. 16, 17).

Paul allegorizes on this story, linking Ishmael to Israel “according to the flesh” and describing Isaac as a “child of promise” (Gal. 4:21-31). This seems arbitrary, but Paul’s allegory is based on Genesis, where Ishmael’s life anticipates the history of Israel. Driven from Abraham’s camp, Ishmael goes into the wilderness with his mother, who miraculously discovers water and finds him an Egyptian bride with whom he later has 12 sons, princes in their tribes (25:12-16). Ishmael is the first of Abraham’s sons to experience exodus and wilderness, the first to become a great nation.

Ishmael’s life is an allegory for Israel’s history, but his story is overshadowed by the fact that the promises to Abraham are for the younger, the child of the Spirit born

after Abraham's flesh is cut off in circumcision.

Paul's baptismal exhortation in Romans 6 also depends on this first man-Last Man structure. Paul describes the sin of Adam and the obedience of Jesus (Rom. 5:12-21), then reminds the Romans that they have died to sin to walk in newness of life. Death to sin is death to Adam, the death to death that baptism marks and brings about.

N. T. Wright (in the *Interpreter's Bible Commentary on Romans* and elsewhere) has pointed to the subtextual Exodus narrative in Romans 5-8. Adam's sin leaves humanity in a bondage worse than Egypt; through the baptismal passage through the sea (cf. 1 Cor. 10:1-4), Christians are liberated from slavery; they pass through the wilderness of struggle with sin (Rom. 7), until they reach the promised land of new creation (Rom. 8).

For Paul, the story of Adam and Jesus is also the story of Israel and Jesus, and recapitulated again in the story of the church's death and resurrection.

Paul speaks of a one-time baptismal participation in Christ's death, but this one-time event sets the pattern for the whole life of the disciple. Jesus warns the Twelve that they are worthy to be his followers only if they take the cross and follow him. Bearing the cross means enduring the hatred and murderous opposition of family members and friends. For the Twelve, the cross is a literal threat: If the Jewish leaders hate Jesus enough to kill the Master, what will they do to the servants?

It seems that like the first Adam, the Last brings nothing but death. But the cross is not the end for Jesus or his followers. Jesus is Isaac, child of the Spirit, who passed through the death waters to resurrection. The crucified Master is also the risen Master. Jesus is not the first man but the Last Man. And the last shall be first and the first last.