

Better than the Bible

June 21, 2026

Genesis 21:8-21

Romans 6:1b-11

What could be better than the Bible? Yes, that title is deliberately provocative. If we're honest with ourselves and others, however, it's true that the Bible is an uneven work of literature. The first time I read through the Bible, I didn't read it exactly through. Jeremiah ends with the relentlessly depressing accounts of the fall of Jerusalem and the tragic early days of Babylonian occupation, and then I read the Lamentations of Jeremiah, which is even more depressing.

I had to take a break. I had to read something with a happy ending. So I read the Gospel of Matthew. Then I went back to resume my progress through the Bible with Ezekiel.

It's also true that your tastes may favor some parts of the Bible over others. Those who like poetry may gravitate to the Psalms or the Song of Songs. History fans might prefer First and Second Samuel and First and Second Kings, or in the New Testament, Acts of the Apostles. If you want to hear about Jesus' work as a healer, read Mark. If you want to hear some of your favorite parables, read Luke. If you want to hear Jesus say, "I am...," head over to John.

I suppose if you're a fan of genealogy, you'd enjoy those long family lists in Numbers, but you'd be a rare person.

A lot of people read the Bible for wisdom, guidance, and models for their own decisions and actions. The Bible is full of advice, even more advice than I'm happy to give you. Some books are dedicated to giving advice. The writers of Proverbs (it's a collection, so there were a lot of them) and Ecclesiastes have plenty of guidance for you. And then there's the Apostle Paul, whose willingness to tell other people what to do has informed many generations of Christians.

One of the models of faith for generations of Jews, Christians, and Muslims is Abraham. He trusted God enough to move to a new place, and he believed God's promise of descendants. We also revere his wife Sarah. She laughed at the promise, it's true, but she also lived and fulfilled it.

Which makes this story even harder to take. Because Abraham and Sarah act horribly here.

Ishmael, Hagar's son by Abraham, existed because Sarah insisted upon it. Believing that she would not have a child of her own, she forced her slave to have her husband's child. As Vanessa Lovelace writes at Working Preacher, "Ishmael's birth would also have brought Sarah esteem, since ancient Near Eastern surrogacy laws granted her the right to raise the child as her own.

With the birth of Isaac, however, Ishmael's status changed—from Sarah's legal son and Abraham's firstborn heir to the son of a slave woman."

Sarah was not willing for her son to share Abraham's inheritance with any other child, and especially not to be second in line to Hagar's son. Commentators have tried to soften her position for centuries, but the text is clear: "the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." It was about the transmission of wealth and the family name. My son, not her son.

An understandable feeling, I suppose. But acting upon the feeling to condemn Hagar and Ishmael to death?

I don't care whether it was legal by the standards of the time. I don't care whether the social mores of the time embraced it. I don't care.

It was wrong. Dead wrong. Horribly wrong. Sinfully wrong.

And that is what I mean by "better than the Bible." Abraham and Sarah are heroic figures in many ways. They are archetypes for Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

But at this moment, we have to be better than the Bible.

This story gets me angry because Abraham and Sarah decided to dispose of Hagar and Ishmael. Before Isaac's birth, Abraham had pleaded with God, "O that Ishmael might live in your sight!" But now the boy was disposable. The mother was disposable. Once members of the family, now they were disposable.

Disposable people. Disposable people.

That's why I get angry.

The problem with Abraham and Sarah's treatment of Hagar and Ishmael isn't that it's exceptional. It's that it's been echoed so many times by so many people in so many cultures over so many centuries. On this weekend following Juneteenth, I have to raise the world-wide practice of slavery. For millennia, some people have insisted that some other people have had to follow their instructions, do their work, bear children to those they insisted on, and live where they said. Under some codes, enslaved people lived or died at the will of those who held them in bondage.

These were literally disposable people.

The Law of the Hebrew Bible, I regret to say, mitigated the evils of slavery without eliminating them. Slavery of Hebrews had to be time limited, and enslaved people could not be abused or their possessions stripped from them. But still: disposable people. Though slavery is illegal in

every country in the world today, the International Labour Organization found in 2022 that 28 million people endure forced labor and another 22 million are forced into marriages – just like Hagar.

That's why we've got to be better than the Bible.

The Bible both warns against national leaders who abuse their authority and praises them. God warned the Israelites through Samuel against the appointment of a monarch. Saul proceeded to demonstrate the accuracy of the warning. At God's direction, Samuel anointed David to displace and succeed Saul, and everybody celebrated. Well, not everybody.

I can't help noting that David spent more time in power than Saul, and had more time to demonstrate the abuses of kings. Ask David's wives and concubines. Ask his sons, two of whom rebelled against him. Ask Bathsheba. Ask Uriah.

When national leaders abuse their power, they create disposable people. Sometimes they're the women they want to abuse. Sometimes they're the foreigners they want to eject. Sometimes they're the political opponents they want to subdue. Sometimes they're people with a different skin color. Sometimes they're people who are attracted to people of the same gender. Sometimes they're people who are women.

If you want to justify any of these abuses — anti-immigrant, political imprisonment, racism, heterosexism, sexism — you can do it from the Bible. Sexism and heterosexism are easy. Racism? Yes, you can justify that. The Bible is rife with anti-foreign sentiment. It's harder to make the case for imprisoning your political opponents, because a number of the prophets turn out to have been the political opponents of the monarchs, but if you work hard enough, you can do it.

You can justify disposable people.

That's why we've got to be better than the Bible.

Amy Frykolm writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, "This is an astonishing story to find amongst the accounts of the patriarchs and matriarchs of Genesis. It follows not the perspective of the householders, but the perspective of the slave. Not the ones who are awaiting their destiny to be fulfilled by God, but the one who is collateral damage along the way. Hagar is the archetypal mother of every person who has ever been exiled, who has fled violence, both domestic and governmental, every person who has found themselves shunned, discarded, trafficked, forgotten."

In Hagar, we hear from the disposable people.

It turns out they're not disposable.

Amanda Benckhuysen writes at Working Preacher, "Our chosenness as people of faith does not mean that we have a corner on God. It does not mean that God's love and care is limited to us. What is striking about Isaac and Ishmael is that God makes the same promise to them both. They would each become a great nation. They would both experience God's presence and blessing."

Hagar and Ishmael were not disposable.

We are not disposable. It's the foundational assertion of Christianity, that God has no desire to discard any of the souls that God has placed upon the Earth.

The people who aren't us are not disposable. Whether they're male or female, Jew or Greek, slave or free (to borrow from the Apostle Paul), they are not disposable. Whether they agree with us or with someone else, whether they're gay or straight or bi or trans, whether they've committed a crime or been accused of one, whether they're demonstrating against abortion or against ICE raids, no people are disposable.

No people are disposable.

That's why we've got to be better than Abraham and Sarah. Better than the Bible.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson