“One Tree Hill”: Birthright and the New Covenant

Lisa Gasson

“We belong here—you ain’t never belonged here”—A River Court Player to Lucas Scott

“One Tree Hill” is a teen drama created by Mark Schwahn. The show premiered in 2003 on the WB Television Network. It continues, now in its seventh season, on the CW Network. While never a break-out hit show, “One Tree Hill” has a considerable cult fan base, and has recently moved into syndication. The show is rooted in basketball and high school cultures and tells the story of two brothers. As we shall see, the narrative of the Scott brothers elevates the television show from mere teenaged soap opera to popular culture text. The relationship of the brothers, in fact, evokes similar stories of brothers going back to the biblical traditions of Isaac and Ishmael. By treating this television series as a cultural text in dialogue with the theological traditions rooted in the Bible, we can see both text and tradition in a new light.

The opening sequence of the pilot episode of “One Tree Hill” sets up the basic premise of the series. Mark Schwahn calls this scene "mirror lives," because it sets up two half-brothers, in their differences and their similarities. The brothers share the same father, but lead very different lives. The scene opens with the iconic shot of series: a solitary figure who dribbles a basketball as he walks swiftly across a bridge at sunset. The scene is punctured with the opening riff of a guitar-driven pop song. The shot is lonely, dramatic, and establishes basketball as a key story-telling device. This solitary figure is then contrasted with the crowd in a first shot of Tree Hill high school. The scene then moves to the interior of the gym where a team, the Tree Hill Ravens, is preparing to play a game of basketball. In the gym we meet one of the brothers Nathan Scott.
The gym is large and brightly lit—a full crowd is in attendance and a group of cheerleaders perform in one corner. A professional basketball announcer describes the action: there are a lot of crane shots, which give the gym a vast scope. Nathan is the strongest player on the team; he makes a slam-dunk and the announcer confirms his star status.

The scene switches to Lucas Scott, the solitary figure from the opening shot, as he arrives at an outdoor basketball court called the River Court. The driving rock music of the previous scene is replaced with quiet rap, which sounds as though it might be natural to the location instead of a soundtrack. Two nerdy teenage boys announce the game instead of professionals—they are the only audience. The announcers greet Lucas and announce his superb win-loss record. As the game starts, there is an air of practiced competition instead of the intensity of the Tree Hill gym. The games happening at the River Court and the Tree Hill gym are inter-cut, until the action climaxes: both Scott brothers are positioned to make the winning basket and do so one after another. The brothers are from very different circumstances but clearly share the same gift for basketball. The story will go on to reveal how basketball forces Lucas to face the destiny that his birthright has afforded him in the form of athletic ability. The brothers are pressed into a competition for Nathan's place on the varsity basketball team that culminates in a one-on-one showdown.

Can this teenage tale of two brothers have a fruitful dialogue with the Christian tradition? There is no mention of God in the show—any transcendence that occurs is purely human. What theological insight can be found? In his work on the study of theology and popular culture, Gordon Lynch describes a number of approaches taken by scholars of religion to popular texts. One of these he calls “the revised correlational” approach. In essence, the “revised correlational” approach treats popular cultural texts as worthy of theological engagement. Gordon suggests that
there are three phases of a "revised correlational approach" to the study of theology and popular culture: "descriptive theology" which considers what the pop-culture text can bring to a dialogue, "historical theology" which considers what the Christian tradition can offer to dialogue, and "systematic theology" which synthesizes the first two fronts into a meaningful conclusion. Following this method, the struggle to assume the place of privilege that is associated with a birthright that is depicted in “One Tree Hill” does find a dialogue partner in the Christian tradition. Comparing the story of the Scott brothers to that of Isaac and Ishmael offers an entry point into discussion. God solves the conflict between the biblical brothers by creating two covenants. The biblical narrative continues to follow the story of one brother, while the other moves to the sideline. In the pilot for “One Tree Hill,” however, one brother does not leave the story. The episode concludes with both brothers joining the basketball team; the show will develop the story of the brothers as they both participate in the varsity basketball, sharing the blessing afforded to them through their paternal heritage. “One Tree Hill” offers a model to rethink covenants, particularly the relationship between God's covenants with the people of Israel and the new covenant that Christians claim in Christ. Christianity and Judaism share a birthright: recent theological consideration of covenants argues that Christianity as the younger brother does not usurp the birthright of the older brother Judaism. When a new covenant is formed in Christ, each tradition is free to participate in the same covenant and promise of salvation without losing their individual identity, just as Lucas and Nathan can each find a place on the basketball team.

The story of the Scott brothers shares some narrative elements with the story of Isaac and Ishmael, which appears in Genesis 16: 1-5, 17: 17-27, and 21: 1-21. The Scott brothers’ story is not identical to this story nor is this the only brother story in the Old Testament that shares features with the narrative of “One Tree Hill,” but this comparison offers a point of entry into
dialogue. Old Testament commentator Gordon Wenham explains that the incidents surrounding Isaac and Ishmael are integral to the Abraham cycle, which describes the development of the people of Israel in covenant with God. God makes a covenant with Abraham—saying that he will have a son to inherit his land and that his descendants will be many (Gen 16). In an attempt to fulfill the promise, Sarah asks Abraham to have a child with her servant Hagar: the resulting boy is named Ishmael (Gen 16). Miraculously, Sarah later bears Isaac, who is the son that she has been promised. Similarly, Lucas and Nathan Scott share a father, but have different mothers. In the biblical narrative the existence of these two sons causes a conflict. When Isaac is old enough to be weaned, Sarah sees Abraham's other son Ishmael and becomes afraid that Ishmael will inherit with her son Isaac (Gen 21). Sarah begs Abraham to send Ishmael away and Abraham complies after God tells him to obey. Hagar and Ishmael are sent out into the wilderness.

Parents who strive to protect their son's birthright are also found in “One Tree Hill”: this is evident in a set of scenes that present another contrast between the brother's lives. The scenes take place after Lucas has been invited by the coach to join the varsity basketball team; each brother discusses his future in basketball with a parent. The scene between Lucas and his mother reveals his mother's support for her son. She encourages him to play basketball, even though it brings back uncomfortable memories for her. The contrasting scene is between Nathan and his father Dan. Nathan is bench-pressing weights; Dan comes in and immediately insists that Nathan try to lift more weight. He adds more plates to the bar and when Nathan struggles, Dan takes over. He is the classic overbearing sports father. When Nathan tries to refer to Dan's other "son," Dan asks Nathan to not call him that. He encourages Nathan to scare Lucas away from playing basketball, telling him there's "a bigger picture here—your picture and this kid's not in it". Dan is
unwilling to acknowledge Lucas as his son and strives to protect Nathan's birthright, which takes
the form of the star position on the basketball team. In this scene, Dan's actions are similar to
Sarah in the biblical narrative. Sarah acts out of an extreme maternal instinct, and insults Hagar
by not referring to her by name when she talks to Abraham. The commentary suggests there is a
historical precedent to suggest that the children of slave-wives could inherit with other wives, so
Sarah's fear has a historical context.

In the biblical narrative, God overrides the conflicts between parents. After they have
been sent to the wilderness God makes a new promise to Hagar and Ishmael, while continuing to
honour the original covenant that he made to Abraham and Sarah (Gen 21). God resolves the
problem by creating two separate covenants: both sons will have numerous descendants, but they
will dwell in different lands. The Old Testament narrative goes on to follow the story of Isaac,
leaving behind the story of Ishmael, in favour of the story that leads to the people of Israel, with
whom God made the first covenant. It appears as though Ishmael is sidelined in the story.
Wenham argues that the choice to deal with the sideline story of Ishmael before moving on with
the main narrative is a pattern that reoccurs throughout Genesis. However, the commentary also
claims that the stories reveal Isaac’s deep love for Ishmael and Hagar. God uses the pride of
Ishmael and the jealousy of Sarah to fulfill the promises of God to Abraham. In this story, God
is faithful to both brothers individually.

The pilot episode of “One Tree Hill” culminates in a one-on-one basketball competition
between the brothers. Nathan challenges Lucas to the game, offering to quit the basketball team
if he loses. The boys come together at midnight on the River Court for a battle, which is
heightened by an emotion-wrenching piece of music. The divide between the social groups of the
boys is evident: Nathan arrives at the court in a fancy truck and the teenage announcers of the
River Court are mocked. The game itself is very evenly matched. It comes down to a final moment: Lucas has the ball, ready to go for the final shot. Nathan taunts Lucas saying, "he never mentioned you once, not in all these years"—a reference to their shared father. Lucas responds, "this is for my mother" and shoots the basket that wins the game. Lucas wins the right to take Nathan's place on the basketball team. Lucas, however, does not demand that Nathan leave the team. The final shot of the episode shows Lucas walking into the gym during a basketball practice. The players and cheerleaders all stop to look. A close-up of Nathan's face reveals that he is resigned to sharing the gym with Lucas. The series will continue to develop the story of the brothers as they both dwell in the promised land of the basketball court.

Christian theology understands God's covenants with the people of Israel as having been extended to include Christians through Christ. Throughout history there has been a struggle for Christians to understand how this "new covenant" in Christ relates to the ones that God has made with the Israelites. In his article "Covenant Theology and the Jewish-Christian dialogue," Eugene Fisher outlines this shift in the theological understanding of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. The main issue at stake in the shift, Fisher argues, is that of covenant, because since the patristic times there has been a general consensus among Christian theologians that the covenants God made with the Jews were broken. This theology of covenantal discontinuity contends that a new covenant was formed with the advent of Jesus, which renders the old covenant void, as if the younger brother has usurped the place of the older. This theology of discontinuity was largely not reconsidered until the twentieth century. In this period, the event of the Holocaust motivated theologians to re-examine their relationship with Jews. This re-examination was enabled by new biblical scholarship, which facilitated dialogue between Christians and Jews. Fischer describes a "progression (and progressive complexification) of
Christian scholarly appreciation of the nature and the function of the covenant theme within the Hebrew Scriptures. Fischer argues that the multiple covenants, Noahide, Abrahamic, and Mosaic, are found within the Jewish Scriptures, none of which is presented as abrogating the others.

Norbert Lohfink's book *The Covenant Never Revoked: Biblical Reflections on Christian-Jewish Dialogue* argues that there is now a single covenant with two different ways for salvation. He describes a "twofold way of salvation," which envelopes both Christians and Jews. Lohfink resolves this twofold way with an eschatological emphasis, which holds together a two-fold path of salvation into a single covenant. Lohfink writes that it is in Christ that "the one 'covenant' has concentrated itself to eschatological radicalness and so has become the 'new covenant' in the ultimate and most profound sense."

This is a very basic way to understand theologically how Christianity as a younger brother does not usurp the place of favour that the Jewish people occupy.

In the end of the “One Tree Hill” pilot, there is no separation of paths for the Scott brothers. When their story is placed into dialogue with the story of Isaac and Ishmael, it offers insight into how two brothers can assume their birthright, in their own way, without invalidating the position of the other. However, the biblical story speaks back to the television series by pointing out that it is God who assures the fulfillment of covenants. The story of the Scott brothers depicts negotiations of humans who are trying to take their rightful place within society; the story of Isaac and Ishmael reveals a God who is faithful to his covenants. The humanity of “One Tree Hill” is painfully evident when you consider that while Lucas does not demand his brother's place on the varsity basketball team, he does demand Nathan's girlfriend (though he does not claim her when he successfully wins the game). However, this flawed pop culture text
does offer a lens through which to consider the bigger issue of covenant. It is possible for God to keep his covenants in a way that does not force a separation between groups. This can even be extended to understand how Judaism and Christianity, which share a birthright, also share a promise for salvation.

Works Cited


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Notes


3 Wenham, 82.

4 Wenham, 83.

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9 Fischer, 7.

10 Fischer, 7.

11 Fischer, 17.


13 Lohfink, 81.