

### **Overview of Genesis 12-25**

- These chapters tell the stories from the call of Abra(ha)m to the opening of the story of rivalry between Jacob and Esau. They are sandwiched between the 'pre-history' (Gen.1-11) and the story of Jacob's family (Gen 26-36). The book then concludes with the Joseph narratives (Gen.37-50) which are frequently understood as linked to wisdom traditions. Some scholars argue that Genesis 38 interrupts the latter section.
- The stories in chapters 12-25 relate primarily to Abraham but also introduce Isaac and Jacob. These three are traditionally called the Patriarchs; but the term Ancestors is now becoming more frequent.
- The stories focus equally on women characters (Sarah, Hagar and Rebekah in 1-25; and then Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, Zilpah, plus Dinah in 26-36). How these stories are presented raise significant questions for all biblical interpreters, not just feminists.
- Many stories include explanations as to why someone, or somewhere, is so named - i.e they are aetiological stories.
- Some of Christianity's foundational theological concepts, such as promise, blessing, covenant, and faithfulness are found within these narratives.
- The authorship and dating of the stories/texts remain issues of hot debate, as do ideas about the compilation of the whole book.

### **Genesis 12**

- Note the geographical span of the narrative in Gen 12. From Haran (Syria), through Canaan, the Negeb, and down to Egypt. (NB Gen.11:31 starts in Ur = Babylon)
- Consider the time span implied by this narrative. Is it a continuous journey, or one with stops of varying duration along the way? (See Gen 16:16 and 17:1)
- What is the genre of the literature? Narrative, story, history, theology, or.... ?

### **The thrice told tale (12:10-20; 20:1-18; cf. 26:6-11)**

- Note the relationships between the so-called thrice told tale (the third version is found in Gen 26-36). This tale demonstrates some of the critical issues in this text (and in all the Pentateuchal narratives). In context each has its own theological significance.
- Are these three stories, two, or is it simply one story transmitted in several versions? If so, which is original? Is one of them 'historical'?
- Note the common feature: a wife is portrayed as a sister to a foreign 'king'.
- Note the differences: the reason for the deceit, the complicity of the woman; the intervention of God, the outcome.

### **Additional notes on thrice told tale: Gen.12:10-20**

Contrast with 12:1-9 where Abram obeys God; here Abram takes the initiative, nowhere does he seek God's guidance as to what to do. (Blind faith vs human self-reliance)

Note the idea of Sarai as beautiful/sexually desirable; yet 'barren' & apparently 65 yrs old.

Note Abram's presumption that Egyptians are murderous, sexual predators - on what basis?

This is the first reference to Egypt in the text (might this be a late story by someone reflecting back on Israel's oppression by Egypt before the exodus?)

Abram's concern is for his own safety, he shows no concern that Sarai may be raped.

Abram instructs Sarai to lie - passing responsibility to her, to save his life. Issues of authority, of concept of marriage, of property etc. arise here. Does she comply?

If Sarai has a sexual encounter with an Egyptian this will raise questions about the parentage of any child she bears.

Can the promise to Abram about descendants be fulfilled without Sarai?

The Egyptians actually behave honourably, in accordance with marriage and/or property customs (is Sarai bought? is a dowry offered?); and with generosity in respect of the deceit enacted against them.

The narrator tells us that God intervenes on behalf of Sarai - not Abram (contrast vv.12-13) - by sending plagues on Pharaoh's house. Why might this be? Is the intervention just? Who has committed any 'offence'? Why might the divine intervention be described in terms of plagues? (Links with Exodus?)

Note that none of the characters acknowledge that God has acted in any way.

The text is ambiguous as to whether or not sexual intercourse between Sarai and Pharaoh takes place. What might v.20 imply?

What is different about Abram and Sarai's status, relationship to each other and/or to God and/or towards Egypt, at the end of the story from at the beginning?

Note that no passage of time is specified and yet apparently famine is no longer a problem.

Note similarities/differences in the other two passages in their particular literary contexts.

### **Genesis 13 and Genesis 18-19: Abraham and Lot**

How is Lot presented in relationship to Abra(ha)m? (Think biologically, ethnically and theologically.) What theological issues emerge from these chapters?

Can you think of any other OT stories that connect with these stories about Lot?

### **Genesis 16; Genesis 17:15-21; Genesis 18:1-15; and Genesis 21:1-21: Sarah and Hagar**

What relationships exist between Abra(ha)m and both Sarai/Sarah and Hagar? Do these change? How do the women relate to God? Which human character has power or influence over events?

### **Genesis 16:10-16; Genesis 17:18-27; Genesis 21:1-15; Genesis 22:1-19; Genesis 24:62-67; and Genesis 25:1-11; Isaac and Ishmael**

What significance is given to Isaac? What significance is given to Ishmael? Which human characters recognise any of this significance? Where is God in these stories?

### **Overarching themes**

**Land:** It is never specifically identified in terms of physical extent, always referred to as a gift from God and a territory to be revealed by God (12:1; 13:14f; 17:8; etc.). Linked with Canaan, which itself is not precisely defined as a territory and generally thought of as a loose collection of city states. It is to be possessed, occupied, but not owned. It is surrounded by Mesopotamia (Babylon), Haran (Syria), Egypt, Edom; and the Philistines occupy a portion of the coastal land along the Mediterranean Sea. Abraham keeps passing through the land and only possesses a family burial site (the cave of Machpelah in a field east of Mamre).

**Descendants:** Promised through Abra(ha)m in terms of being a 'great nation', a 'blessing', 'numerous' (as the stars, as grains of sand), (12:2; 15:5; 17:5; 22:7 etc.). In fact, for Israel, descent through Sarah is a necessity (18:10); *but this focus on the mother doesn't continue in the same way in relation to Rebekah, or Leah and Rachel*. Abraham's descendants through Isaac and Ishmael are blessed in similar terms by God (16:10; 17:20; 21:13 etc), indeed the concept of 12 tribes is promised in relation to Ishmael (17:20), whereas it is simply revealed by the narrative in relation to Jacob's 12 sons (Dinah does not 'count').

**Identity:** This is expressed in terms of parentage; land of abode; the concept of the firstborn; covenant relationship; circumcision; marrying in or out of the family. There is no clear

indicator in the texts, no consistency, so that within the narratives various aspects of identity are highlighted in different ways, which raise questions about the fundamental issue: what signifies that anyone is a member of God's people, or eligible to receive divine blessing?

**God:** God is referred to by several names - YHWH, God, El Shaddai, the Shield of Abraham, *the Fear of Isaac*, God of Seeing, God Most High, God of my/your father, El the God of Israel. God is both transcendent and immanent. God 'speaks' directly or through messengers ('angels' and *the 'man' at the Jabbok*). God is beyond time, God of the past, the present and a God who is able to make promises about the future. God is consistent/reliable and responsive to intercession. God is linked with specific places, with people, with journeys. God can be absent, silent. God is always the giver of life.

**Promise/fulfilment:** Does the promise remain consistent, or is it a developing concept? Is it monolithic or multi-faceted? Is promise fulfilled, or does it remain in process of fulfilment? Can promise be thwarted, or is it perhaps more accurately delayed? Can promise be diverted, or its recipients expanded? (If so, is this prompted by human action or a decision of God?)

**Characterisation/typology:** Abraham as 'king'; Sarah as 'Israel'; Egypt as 'oppressor'; Lot, Ishmael and Esau as 'alienated kindred'; Jacob as '*true Israel*'; the Philistines as 'problem neighbours'; the Canaanites as 'a constant threat to Israel's relationship with YHWH'; Ur and the Chaldees as 'Babylon'; Haran as 'original family/home – not Canaanite!'.

**Reading the texts from different perspectives:**

- As a chronological narrative there are gaps and disjunctions, duplications and inconsistencies; but an impression of God's purposes unfolding despite human frailty, disobedience and external 'threats'.
- From the perspective of the time of monarchy patriarchal dominance is evident and issues about the land and securing its borders can be detected. The role of the king in leading the nation can be discerned and allusions to the exodus tradition (and Egypt) are present.
- From the perspective of exile land, loss of land and repossession of land are of significance. Obedience to the covenant and the justice of God are issues that are questioned. Responsibility for Israel's failure to keep the covenant is an issue - who should bear the blame? (Israel? 'Foreigners'? Leaders?)