

## The Abraham Cycle: Genesis 12-25

### 1. Genesis 1-10, continued: Genesis 10 as preface to the Abraham cycle

#### Two accounts of the diversification of humankind:

- *Table of Nations in Genesis 10 (P)* – Using the genre of the genealogical list, P describes how the different nations and languages of the world came to develop from Noah's three sons (Shem, Ham, Japhet); as in P's Creation account, the account is marked by a repeated refrain: "these are the sons of X, by their families, their languages, their lands, and their nations."
- *Story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 (J)* – Using the genre of a story, J also tells how and why humans came to live in different places and speak different languages. Here, the reason is that humans once banded together and tried to build a high tower to heaven, an act of hubris that prompted God to disperse them across the earth and make them speak different languages.

#### Themes and progression in Genesis 1-10

- **P material:** P uses genealogies to communicate how the origins of humankind and its multiplication and diversification after the Flood lead inexorably to the isolation of a single line, stemming from Abraham, as the one chosen line. This transition pivots on an irony: before Abraham, humankind's multiplication was matched by its moral degradation. Abraham, by contrast, is righteous and chosen and worthy of God's partnership, but he struggles to do what seems easy for all the people in all the various genealogical lists, namely, to sire a son.
- **J material:** J focuses on a broader theme: humankind's progressive estrangement from both God and the land – i.e., Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden; Cain's fate of wandering; the development of civilization by Cain's progeny; the Flood; the Tower of Babel. This estrangement leads to a reversal in God's promise of land to Abraham, whereby God, the earth, and humankind will be brought back into their proper and intended relationship.
- **Genesis 1-11 in its redacted form:** The structure of Genesis 1-10 is dominated by P and defined by its *toledot* notices (see chart from last lecture). The main themes, however, are those of J. The redactor, in other words, has woven these themes together in an artful fashion, using P to impose an historical structure that links together the episodic stories in J.

### 2. Differences between Genesis 1-11 and Genesis 12-50

*Subject:* The cosmos and all humankind → one family over four generations.

*Characterization:* Human characters who appear in one tale each and who have more symbolic weight than distinct personalities → Patriarchs are described with increasing depth of human character and action, as we follow characters across the course of many years and many events in their lives.

*Literary style:* Primeval history was dominated by genealogical material interspersed with a series of short, self-contained tales → Patriarchal history is told in progressively larger and larger narrative units with tighter structures, only linked together at key points by genealogical material.

*Theology:* Relationship between God and humankind develops like the relationship between parent and child, beginning as a relationship centered on punishment of disobedience → a partnership (e.g., covenant) predicated on an on-going relationship in the future (e.g., promises).

*Ethics:* A similar move from simplicity to complexity and moral ambiguity, both in divine and human terms. Whereas God simply punishes Adam for a flagrant violation of his command, God and Abraham have discussions about complex moral issues, where right and wrong are not as obvious (e.g., their debate about the destruction of Sodom). In Genesis 12-50, it is not always clear who's in the right and who's in the wrong (e.g., Abraham's lies about Sarah being his sister; their expulsion of Hagar).

#### 4. Major Doublets in the Abraham Cycle, according to the Documentary Hypothesis

*Wife-Sister Motif*: Genesis 12:10-20 (J) vs. Genesis 20 (E)

*Covenant*: Covenant of the Pieces in Gen 15 (J) vs. Covenant of Circumcision in Gen 17 (P)

*Annunciation of Isaac*: Isaac's birth foretold by God to Abraham in Gen 17 (P) vs. Isaac's birth foretold by three mysterious visitors to Abraham w/Sarah overhearing in Gen 18 (J).

*Naming of Isaac*: P accounts for the name Isaac (meaning laughing, rejoicing, playing, and so on) by Abraham's surprise at God's promise of his birth (17:17); J accounts for the name with Sarah's laughter (18:10-14); E explains after Isaac's birth and links it to Sarah's delight at the baby (21:6-7)

#### 5. Major material attributed to E (Elohist) in Genesis 12-36, according to the Documentary Hypothesis

- Abraham and Sarah in Gerar (Gen 20)
- Expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael (Gen 21:6-20)
- Binding of Isaac (Gen 22)

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#### KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

**Patriarchs** – Term used to refer primarily to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob/Israel, as the forefathers of the people Israel. Their main wives – Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel – are called the matriarchs.

**Covenant** – A pact or formal agreement between two parties in which there are mutual obligations and expectations. In the Pentateuch, ancient Near Eastern ideas about the covenants between people are used metaphor to describe God's relationship with his people. The major covenants are God's covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15) and the Sinai/Moses covenant between God and Israel (Exodus 19-24). P uses a succession of covenants to track the development of history.

**Promises** – God's promises to Abraham serve to set up the motivation for the rest of the Abraham Cycle (see #3 above) but also for the entire Pentateuch: God promises that Abraham will be the father of a great nation and promises that this nation will settle in Canaan, and the Pentateuch, in essence, tells the story of how precisely this happens. When Abraham is put asleep during the Covenant of the Pieces in Genesis 15, God tells even him how and when: "Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete" (Gen 15:13-16).

**Abraham Cycle as aetiology and ancestral tale**: Read on its own terms, the Patriarchal History explains how and why the Israelites came to dwell in their land. Noting external evidence for extensive migrations in the precise areas that Abraham is described as traveling (i.e., from southern and western Mesopotamia and into Canaan) in the second millennium BCE, many historians suggest that the tales about Abraham reflect the historical reality of the migrations of the groups that became the Israelites, later retold schematically in stories about a single founding figure and his family.