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# The Yahwist Looks at Abraham

Klein: The Yahwist Looks at Abraham

Ralph W. Klein

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While the Bible is recognized as God's Word for all times, each of its writings was originally addressed to specific people at specific times in history who faced immediate crises and/or opportunities. Obviously, the better we understand those original circumstances, the better we will understand precisely what was being said. To determine matters of date and authorship, of course, is extremely difficult several thousand years later, and any suggestions must be viewed as hypothetical and subject to revision. One common suggestion has been that parts of the Pentateuch were written in the 10th century B. C., at the time of David and Solomon, when Israel had risen to great heights of power and wealth. Because the author of these materials used Yahweh (rather than Elohim) as the divine name from the very beginning of his narrative, he is customarily called the Yahwist. Space does not permit reviewing here the many arguments for or against this theory or hypothesis.<sup>1</sup> Instead, we shall speak from the point of view of one who tentatively accepts this theory of authorship in order to see what contributions it has to make toward clarifying the Biblical message.

The traditions about Abraham in the Yahwist present an especially helpful test area for this approach because (a) Abraham is of central theological significance in the Bible; (b) the theological issues discussed are at the center of the Biblical witness;

and (c) an account of Abraham composed by the priestly writer can be used for purposes of control and contrast.

In telling the story of Abraham, the Yahwist was preaching to an Israel that was rich, powerful, and proud. Although it had seen the promises of land and children fulfilled beyond Abraham's wildest dreams, Israel faced new questions raised by the fulfillment itself: Why are we the recipients of the promise? What do we do now?

God's message through the Yahwist to 10th-century Israel is of more than antiquarian interest. It affirms the centrality of promise in Biblical theology by repeating that promise more than 10 times, and it also shows that Abraham—and Israel for that matter—did not deserve God's kindness. Abraham's faithlessness is repeatedly underscored, but Yahweh in spite of Abraham's sin or because of his need remains faithful to the promise. This promise led Abraham to faith and to obedient life as well—twin goals to which Israel was called by the Yahwist's retelling of Abraham's story.

This word of God still addresses us Christians in our different situation, with its different problems. The promise has been ratified and renewed over the years, its focal point made clear in the Promise which is Jesus the Christ. The promise is offered now to latter-day liars, chauvinists, and opportunists, and it still empowers them for being a blessing to the whole world. We can learn from the Yahwist, who applied the story of Abraham to a new situation and thus be better equipped for the hermeneutical task, the preacher's very life.

<sup>1</sup> For the positive points see Peter Ellis, *The Yahwist* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Fides Publishers, Inc., 1968). The negative arguments can be found in the introductions of Gleason Archer, Ronald Harrison, and E. J. Young.



## CALLED TO SEEK A NEWER WORLD (GENESIS 12)

The new world Abraham sought was the land. Who could ever forget the celebration of this faith act recorded also in Heb. 11:8: "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go"? Perhaps the "new world" to which Abraham was called was belief in Yahweh and a putting away of the gods Israel's fathers served beyond the Euphrates (Joshua 24:2). But above all, as Gen. 12:1-3 makes clear, the new world was a world of blessing.

Genesis 2-11 portrays a maze of alienation and lack of communication—how modern these maladies sound! Once everything and everyone had been in perfect relationship. God walked in man's garden in the cool of the day. Man and woman were of "one bone" and "one flesh." Even the wild animals offered themselves as potential helpers; work and childbirth were natural, without pain.

And then people tried to be like God, to decide what was in their own best interest. As a result all relationships were off! They hid from God, blamed one another, killed one another. What had started as perfect harmony ended in the cacophony of Babel—even the construction workers couldn't understand each other.

In and for this context, according to the Yahwist, Abraham was called to seek a newer world. Promises of land and children—even of reputation—were offered to him, but his singular assignment was to bring blessings to all the families of the earth. He was called to knit up the frazzled relationships between men and God, men and women, men and the world. For the Yahwist's audience, however, the promises had become fulfillments: They had completed the conquest of the Promised Land under David; they

had seen their population expand and grow; their renown had reached even to the Queen of Sheba. Imperial Israel had experienced the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham, but the Yahwist reminded them of an assignment still outstanding: Be a blessing to the nations.

The Yahwist continued his account by reporting a renewal of God's promise (12:7), but Abraham quickly disclosed his own unworthiness when he left the land at the first sign of famine, passed his wife off as his sister to save his own life, took a bribe of livestock, and managed to be the indirect cause of a series of plagues on Pharaoh's house (12:10-20)!<sup>2</sup> Father Abraham is a liar, a chauvinist, a selfish opportunist! Jacob, of course, is no better in the Yahwist's report. He is a shyster already in the womb (25:26), grabbing the heel of his brother. He lies to get the birthright, dressing up with skins and hair to fool his feeble father. Jacob meets his father's suspicions with outright blasphemy: "Yahweh has given me success [in hunting]" (27:20). When the Yahwist recalls these unsavory details from the patriarchal sagas, he is no muckraker. Rather, he proclaims that the liar and cheat Jacob was found and blessed by the promising God at Bethel (Gen. 28) and that Abraham too was utterly dependent on God's call. He also wants to remind all Israelites that they are Abrahams and Jacobs, unworthy recipients of the promise.

## THEOLOGY BY CONTRASTS

In addition to series of repeated promises, the Yahwist selects two

<sup>2</sup> Incidents with a wife-sister also appear in Gen. 20 and 26. Gen. 20 is edited by the Elohist; 26 by the Yahwist. The Elohist portrays Abraham as a good example, an unselfish, truthful prophet who prays for his enemies. Questions about the mechanics of revelation are presented in detail.



other kinds of material from the Abraham traditions, incidents which show the patriarch as faithful to the promise and incidents which portray him as faithless to the promise. This contrast was seen above as Abraham faithfully followed God's call to Canaan but faithlessly fled to Egypt, deceived Pharaoh, and endangered Sarah—all to his own benefit. The interplay between God's repeated promises and these contrasting pictures of Abraham will be studied under three headings: Abraham and God; Abraham and Sarah; Abraham and Lot.

### ABRAHAM AND GOD

(14:18—16:14)

In this section the Yahwist records three magnificent promises of God and Abraham's ambivalent reactions to them. The first blessing is delivered by Melchizedek, who suddenly appears after Abraham's victory over the five captors of Lot (Gen. 14:18-20). Political motivations may have been responsible in part for the inclusion of this archaic account. When the Yahwist reports that Abraham (a symbol of Israel?) pays a tithe (tax) to the priest king of Jerusalem, and that Abraham (that is, Israel or the Davidic monarchy) is blessed by his association with Jerusalem's cultus (see Ps. 110), he is giving a lesson in political and ecclesiastical authority. More important than these political implications is the explicit message that Abraham is again blessed, this time by God most high (*El Elyon*), the Creator of heaven and earth.

Extra-Biblical documents help us to understand more clearly the historical background of Abraham's next action.<sup>3</sup> Lacking a son of his own, he conspired to make his slave his

heir, thus following the mores and legal customs of Mesopotamia in patriarchal times (15:2-3). According to the Yahwist, this action was rejected by God as a sign of unfaith. Instead, God assures Abraham in a second statement of the promise that a naturally born son will be his heir and he takes the patriarch outside to count the stars—so numerous will his children be (15:5). God thus indicates His plan for history, and Abraham firmly assents to it; he takes it seriously and adjusts to it. In the Bible's own words: "He believed in Yahweh; and He counted it to him for righteousness" (15:6). Here Abraham demonstrates that kind of trust which the promise is always meant to engender. There was no proof, outside of the promise itself; Abraham and Sarah were no younger after the promise than before.

This high point in Abraham's faith life is matched by a third blessing, a high point in God's promissory efforts, the so-called "covenant of pieces" (15:7-21). On instructions from Yahweh Abraham took various sacrificial animals and divided them in two. After sunset "a smoking furnace and a flaming torch passed between these pieces," and Yahweh made a covenant to give Abraham's seed (Israel) the whole land, from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates.

Familiarity with these accounts should not dull our reaction to their radical formulation. It is not Abraham who passes through the pieces; he participates only in a dream. The smoking furnace and flaming torch are symbolic of Yahweh Himself. "If I go back on this agreement," Yahweh is saying, "may I be hacked in pieces and dismembered just like these animals." God invokes a curse on Himself! Only the overly curious would query how God could be dismembered. The theological point is the utter seriousness with which Yahweh makes His oath.

<sup>3</sup> The best discussion of the comparison between patriarchal customs and ancient Near Eastern data can be found in R. de Vaux, *Histoire ancienne L' Israel* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1971).



Surely such a promise should lead to faith and obedience, but the Yahwist records only more conspiracy, more unfaith, on the part of Abraham. At the instigation of Sarah, Abraham engenders a child by his wife's maid. While the historian rushes forward with evidence to show how such contrivances were part of archaic Mesopotamian custom,<sup>4</sup> the theologian notes the negative lessons which the Yahwist draws. Abraham's cohabitation with the maid showed his impatience with God's delayed promise, and then he avoids responsibility by letting Sarah do whatever she wants with the uppity girl. Almost laconically the Yahwist remarks that the maid was an Egyptian. Thus it is a representative of "all the families of the earth" from whom Abraham and Sarah withheld blessing. Badly mistreated by the man and woman of promise, Hagar flees, but Yahweh hears her affliction and promises her children that cannot be numbered. The stark contrast between God's irrational self-imprecation in sealing His promise (15:7-21) and Abraham's sudden slip into unfaith and nonblessing (16:1-14) is unforgettable and chillingly reminiscent of many events in Israel's life—and our own.

#### ABRAHAM AND SARAH (GEN. 18)

The Yahwist's next scene finds Abraham confronting three "men" by the oaks of Mamre, one of whom is Yahweh incognito. This time Abraham is a paragon of hospitality and blessing. He begs his visitors to stay, provides for their cleanliness and comfort, and rushes off to fix a full-course meal. We are not told when or how Yahweh's identity became known, but His eventual announcement that a son would be born within a year

repeated the very essence of the promise. Sarah heard and laughed in disbelief. In recording Sarah's laughter, the Yahwist pulls off some grim humor. For "laugh" and "Isaac" are based on the same Hebrew root. Sarah's unbelief underscored the reliability of the promise. She heard it and "Isaac'd." Her fault ran even deeper; she also lied: "I did not laugh." God rebuked her but repeated the promise of a son. (18:14)

Yahweh then recalls how Abraham was to be a great and mighty nation through whom all nations would be blessed before informing him of the coming destruction of Sodom and Gomorah. This time Abraham is moved to maximum concern for the nations. He begs Yahweh to spare the city if 50, 45, 40, 30, 20, or even 10 righteous are found in it. We are usually impressed by this prayer because it was for a notoriously wicked city,<sup>5</sup> but it must be remembered that this city was also the mother of Ammon and Moab, two of Israel's most despised neighbors. For the like of them Abraham prays.

#### ABRAHAM AND LOT (GEN. 13-14, 18-19)

Running through the Abraham cycle is a subtheme involving his nephew Lot. The Yahwist has carefully selected various incidents where Lot and his family contrast with Abraham. Lot's role is incidental (12:4) until Abraham returns from his escapade in Egypt. When strife breaks out between their herdsmen, Abraham generously allows Lot the first choice in deciding

<sup>5</sup> The sin of Sodom is usually identified as homosexuality. Some see the incident in 19:4-11 as a polemical skit directed against the Canaanite practice of male cultic prostitution. The angels protect the household of Lot by blinding the sex-crazed mob that surrounds the house. According to Is. 1:10 and 3:9 and Ezek. 16:49 the heinous crime of Sodom was injustice and neglect of the poor.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 226-227



where to live. Lot chooses selfishly and foolishly: selfishly because the plain of the Jordan was the best land, well watered like the garden of Yahweh; foolishly because the men of Sodom were exceedingly wicked. Yahweh keeps faith with the generous Abraham by repeating the promise of land and children and bidding him take an inspection tour through the land (13:14-17). The patriarch shows no hard feelings toward Lot when he is informed that his nephew has been kidnapped by five enemy kings. Immediately he summons his 318 household troops and chases the enemy north of Damascus to rescue his relative. That's what being a blessing meant to him, and after the victory he refused any part of the spoils. (Gen. 14)

Lot does not reappear again until after the intercessory prayer of Abraham. When the two angels come to warn him in Sodom, Lot demonstrates the same kind of hospitality that Abraham showed in the previous chapter. Lot mirrors Abraham's concern for others again by urging his sons-in-law to flee the city. To them, however, he seemed only to be kidding. The Hebrew verb used might even imply that he was "Isaacing" them, playing the role of blessing that an Isaac should. This genuine smile seemed to them only mockery.

The rest of the account of Sodom and Gomorrah, however, is a record of Lot's failure. Lot lingers as the city falls, and his wife disobediently looks back and is judged on the spot. Saved by the promising God, Lot and his two daughters still fail. In a sordid tale of drunkenness and incest, the Yahwist relates how each daughter seduced her father and conceived by him bastard children called Moab and Ammon (19:30-35). One reason Israel remembered this etiological story was because of the hatred it felt for these two nations, recently conquered by David. But the Yahwist reminds us

that it was for Sodom and all it stood for, including these bastard children, that Abraham desperately prayed. Surely the Yahwist is telling his own nation—and us as well—how a victorious nation should treat its natural and national enemies.

#### FAITHFUL TO HIS CALLING (GEN. 21—25)

Yahweh showed His faithfulness to the promise by the birth of Isaac, thus keeping His word which He had given (21:1). In Yahwistic material added to the account of the sacrifice of Isaac, Yahweh repeated the promise of children and the commission to bless all nations through them (22:16-18). Finally in 24:1 we are told that Yahweh "had blessed Abraham in everything" (see v. 7). The birth of Isaac was a watershed, for after this great fulfillment of the promise Abraham is consistently faithful to his calling.

The Yahwist records in great detail Abraham's efforts to get a wife for Isaac from his home country (Gen. 24). These efforts are necessary to protect against a syncretistic marriage with a Canaanite. But it was risky business to seek a wife in such a distant land. What if the woman would not want to leave home? Should Isaac then move back to Mesopotamia and thus abandon the promise of the land? Abraham assures the servant whom he sends to fetch a wife, that Yahweh will send His angel with him and that if the woman should be unwilling to come, the servant would be free from the oath of obedience he had made to Abraham. (24:1-8)

In answer to the servant's prayer, beautiful Rebekah demonstrates that she is indeed the one whom Yahweh has chosen. When she shows kind hospitality in giving water to Abraham's servant, she is being a blessing and displaying that identifying trait for which the servant had prayed. She hurries on to give water to his camels



and offers him lodging in her father's house. Laban, whose greed is evident, and Bethuel quickly agree to the marriage, since they recognize it as the will of Yahweh. Her mother and Laban her brother, however, balk the next day and demand that Rebekah stay home at least 10 more days. The servant objects to this and it is decided to let the decision rest with Rebekah herself. Her simple "I will go" (24:58) shows her willingness to be the agent through whom the promise of children born in the land is actualized, and she is sent on her way with the blessing: "Be thou the mother of thousands of ten thousands." (24:60)

The story of Abraham and of his faithfulness is not yet over even after Sarah dies and Rebekah has comforted the mourning Isaac by becoming his wife. Surprisingly, Abraham takes another wife, Keturah, despite his advanced age. Again a historian sees in this marriage and the six children that issue from it stylized reflections of the close ties Israel felt with ancient Arabic tribes. But the Yahwist has something more to add. Abraham marks Isaac as the elect one among his sons by giving him everything he has (25:5). Clearly Isaac is now the bearer of the promise. But the other children are not mistreated, not by him who was called to be a blessing to the nations. Instead, Abraham gives gifts to them too, and sends them away eastward, away from Isaac his son. Thus at the end of his life Abraham has made provision for the continuation of the promise of children, and he has protected Isaac's right to possess the land.

#### ANOTHER VIEW OF ABRAHAM

Interlocked with the Yahwist's story of Abraham is another account which speaks to different issues in a different way. The writer of this account is traditionally identified as a priest since elsewhere in the Pentateuch he seems highly interested in

worship, priesthood, and the tabernacle. This Priestly view of Abraham will be briefly summarized for purposes of comparing its theological emphases with the Yahwist's account.

#### A. ABRAHAM AS MODEL

No traces of the old chauvinistic, selfish Abraham are preserved. Rather, Abraham is commanded to be perfect, and he demonstrates his obedience by circumcising himself and his household immediately after God gives the command (17:23) and by circumcising Isaac shortly after his birth (21:4). The chronological notices in the Priestly account underscore Abraham's obedience, even in the affair with Hagar. Since Abraham came into the land at age 75 and did not get involved with Hagar until he was 86, he appears much less impatient and lacking in trust.<sup>6</sup>

#### B. PROMISE-COVENANT

Promise and covenant are reported by the Priestly writer, but with characteristic differences. The covenant is not "cut" as it was for the Yahwist, but "established" and "given." These words seem to make the covenant almost a decree made by the powerful Word of God (see Gen. 1). The covenant is labeled "everlasting"; its validity would endure even if all other things failed. Since the Priestly writer was addressing Israel in exile, at a time when king, land, and temple were gone, his words would be especially appropriate. The everlasting covenant was valid for Abraham and his descendants forever, and it guaranteed God's people that He would always be their God and they would always have possession of the land.

<sup>6</sup> The significance of the rest of Abraham's chronology is not immediately apparent. It should be noted that Isaac is born when Abraham is 100, and Abraham lives exactly 100 years in the land.



The Priestly writer records an appropriate change of names (from Abram to Abraham, from Sarai to Sarah) to mark the changed status in the patriarch's life brought by this covenant, just as kings often observed the change effected in their status at coronation by taking on a new name. God also promised to multiply Abraham and make him fruitful, recalling the commands made at creation (Gen. 1:28) and after the flood (Gen. 9:1, 7) and anticipating a similar promise in the Priestly account of Jacob. (Gen. 35:11)

### C. FULFILLMENT AND HOPE

Abraham, according to the Priestly view, was only a sojourner in the land, not a real resident owner—just like Israel in exile. With the death of Sarah, however, this relationship ends and fulfillment begins. In a lengthy account the writer reports how Abraham acquired his first piece of property, a burial cave and its surrounding property (Gen. 23). At death the patriarchs were no longer mere aliens, but they got possession of the land. The burial later of Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Leah is dutifully recorded. Their burial was a down payment on the promise of an everlasting possession of the land, and it was the guarantee to the exiles that the main promise, still outstanding, would someday be fulfilled. Similarly the promise of God to make Abraham fruitful and to multiply him received preliminary fulfillment when Israel was fruitful and multiplied in Egypt. (Gen. 47:27)

In other ways, as well, the future hope is emphasized. Circumcision is a mark of identity and a reminder of the everlasting covenant, just as the covenant with Noah was marked by a rainbow to remind God (!) of His

commitment. The greatest hope word of all is the word "remember." At Noah's time God promised to *remember* the covenant. God *remembered* Abraham in fact at the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and saved Lot from the midst of the overthrow (19:29). At the time of the exodus God *remembered* Israel (Ex. 6:5) and delivered Israel from a fearsome tyrant.

If God would only remember now—then that everlasting covenant with Abraham, with its promise of an everlasting possession of the land, would not be just a *de jure* hope; it would be *de facto*, reality itself.

### CONCLUSION

Our survey has shown that the stories of Abraham are more than random historical selections from his life, or individual units which can serve as a warning or example. Instead, the way the data is selected and arranged is part of a pair of important theological treatises. According to the Yahwist's account, Abraham is unworthy, yet he is continually reinforced by God's promissory action. These promises equip him for faith and for blessing to the nations although Abraham often fails, thus underscoring his reliance on the promise. By way of contrast, the Priestly account, also part of a larger scheme, is characterized by God's undying commitment, Abraham's moral example, and God's promise to remember.

Each of these are important words of God applicable also to our several situations. They disclose how the old traditions have to be interpreted, under the guidance of the Spirit, to meet the ever-changing needs of the people of God.

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