

Biblical Narrative: The Stories of the Patriarchs (Genesis 12-36)

Lecture 6 Transcript

<https://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rlst-145/lecture-6>

Overview

This lecture continues with a review of scholarly views on the historical accuracy of the Bible. The narratives of the patriarchs and matriarchs are introduced and the covenant between Abraham and God—which ultimately leads to the formation of a nation—is explained. Central themes of the patriarchal stories include: God’s call to Abraham, God’s promise of a blessed and fruitful nation, threats to this promise (including the story of the binding of Isaac for sacrifice). Finally, after a significant character transformation, the third patriarch Jacob becomes Yisrael (“he who struggles with God”).

1. Scholarly Opinion on the Historical Accuracy of the Bible

[1] *Professor Christine Hayes:* So last time we started discussing the historical merits of the biblical stories of the patriarchs and the matriarchs. These are contained in Genesis 12 through 50. Scholarly opinion on this matter is seriously divided; something you need to know. Some scholars will point to internal biblical evidence for the authenticity and the antiquity of the patriarchal stories. So for example, Nahum Sarna argues that representing Abraham and Isaac and Jacob as foreigners and strangers in Canaan is hardly a convenient tradition for a people who are seeking to establish their claim to its homeland. And if this myth of origins were the fabrication of a later writer, then surely they would have written the story in such a way as to give their ancestors a less tenuous hold or claim, connection, to the land.

[2] He also notes that some of the material in the patriarchal stories would be offensive to later religious sensibilities. Jacob is married to two sisters simultaneously. That is something that is explicitly forbidden in the book of Deuteronomy. Wouldn’t a later writer have cleaned up this ancestral record if this were in fact something composed at a later period? Also, he notes that the representation of inter-ethnic relationships in the patriarchal stories does not accord with the reality of a later period. So for example, the Arameans are considered close kin to the Israelites. “A wandering Aramean was my

father,” it says [Deuteronomy]. And spouses are always chosen — daughters for sons are always chosen by going back to the Aramean people and choosing someone from close kin. But in the period of the monarchy — that’s going to be after 1000 — in the period of the monarchy, there were very poor relations with the Arameans. They were bitter enemies. So why, according to scholars like Sarna, would a biblical author from that period portray the Arameans as close kin, unless they had some older tradition, established tradition that reflected that fact?

[3] So Sarna and other scholars hold that the patriarchal traditions are not entirely fabricated retrojections from a later period. They contain authentic memories of an earlier historic situation. The patriarchs, it’s maintained, were semi-nomads. They lived in tents. From time to time, they wandered to Egypt or Mesopotamia often in search of pasture for their animals. And various details of their language, their customs, their laws, their religion, it’s argued, seem to fit well into the period of the Late Bronze Age. I’ve given you the periods at the top of the chart: early Bronze Age; middle Bronze Age from about 2100 to 1550; we date the late Bronze age from about 1550 until 1200 — the introduction of iron and the beginning of the Iron Age in 1200. Prior to that, the Bronze Age, which is divided into these three periods. So that’s on the one hand: scholars who see these stories as reflecting historical memories and having a certain authenticity to them.

- [4] Then on the other hand, at the other extreme, you have scholars who see the patriarchal stories as entirely fabricated retrojections of a much later age. And they vary significantly as to when they think these stories were written: anywhere from the period of the monarchy all the way down to the fourth century, some of them. Works published in the 1970s by authors like Thomas Thompson, Jon Van Seters, take the position that these stories are filled with anachronisms, their chronologies are confused. These anachronisms and confused chronologies in the patriarchal stories are the rule rather than the exception in their view, and they are evidence of a very late date of composition.
- [5] So you have these two extremes based on the internal evidence of the Bible itself. But you also have the same two extreme positions reflected in the discipline of archaeology. In the early days, archaeology of the region tended toward credulity. And it was explicitly referred to as biblical archaeology — an interesting name, because it suggests that the archaeologists were out there searching for evidence that would verify the details of the biblical text. We're doing biblical archaeology; archeology in support of the biblical text.
- [6] I mentioned last time William F. Albright, an American archaeologist. He believed strongly that archaeological findings were important external evidence for the basic historicity and authenticity of, for example, the patriarchal stories. And certainly some archaeological findings were quite remarkable. Scholars of the Albright school pointed to texts and clay tablets that were discovered in second millennium sites. So you see down on the bottom [of the blackboard] the second millennium BCE, obviously going down to 1000; first millennium: 1000 to 0. The second millennium really wasn't longer than the first millennium, it's just that I ran out of board! But specifically sites like Nuzi and Mari — I've placed them in their approximate places on the timeline — Nuzi and Mari are sites that are near the area that's identified in the Bible as being the ancestral home of the patriarchs in Mesopotamia or on the highway from there to Canaan. These texts and clay tablets were believed to illuminate many biblical customs and institutions. So in the Nuzi texts from about the middle of the second millennium, we learn of the custom of adoption for purposes of inheritance, particularly the adoption of a slave in the absence of offspring.
- Biblical scholars got very excited about this. They point to the biblical passage in which Abraham expresses to God his fear that his servant, Eliezer, will have to be the one to inherit God's promise because Abraham has no son.
- [7] Also according to the Nuzi texts, if a wife is barren, she is to provide a maidservant as a substitute to bear her husband's children. And this is something that happens with three out of the four matriarchs, who are afflicted with infertility: Sarah, Rachel and Leah. There are other parallels in family and marriage law that correlate with certain biblical details.
- [8] In the eighteenth century [BCE], the texts from Mari. They contain names that correspond to Israelite names: Benjamin, Laban, Ishmael. So biblical scholars, buoyed up by these correlations between the archaeological finds, the texts found by archaeologists, and biblical stories, asserted that the patriarchs were real persons and their customs and their legal practices and their social institutions could be verified against the backdrop of the second millennium as revealed by archaeological findings.
- [9] However, it's been argued that some of these ancient sources have been misread or misinterpreted in an effort to find parallels with biblical institutions. A lot of gap-filling is going on to make these texts look as though they correspond to biblical institutions. And skeptics like Thomas Thompson and John Van Seters point out that many of the biblical customs which are paralleled in Ancient Near Eastern sources were still alive and well down in the first millennium. So reference to these customs in the patriarchal stories really doesn't tell us anything about dating. They could derive from anywhere in the second or first millennium. And for other reasons, they think it is much more reasonable to date the composition of these stories to the first millennium, in some cases, quite late first millennium. Furthermore, over time, many discrepancies between the archeological record and the biblical text became apparent. Increasingly, practitioners of what was now being termed Palestinian archaeology, or Ancient Near Eastern archaeology, or archaeology of the Levant, rather than biblical archaeology — some of these archaeologists grew disinterested in pointing out the correlations between the archaeological data and the biblical stories or in trying to explain

away any discrepancies in order to keep the biblical text intact. They began to focus on the best possible reconstruction of the history of the region on the basis of the archaeological evidence regardless of whether or not those results would confirm the biblical text, the biblical account. In fact, this reconstruction often does contradict biblical claims. We're going to see this quite clearly in a few weeks when we consider the book of Joshua and its story of Israel's lightning invasion of the land of Canaan. The archaeological record just doesn't support such a story.

[10] Still, many people have clung to the idea of the Bible as a historically accurate document, many times out of ideological necessity. Many fear that if the historical information in the Bible isn't true, then the Bible is unreliable as a source of religious instruction or inspiration. And that's something they don't want to give up. This is all really a very unfortunate and heavy burden to place on this fascinating little library of writings from late antiquity. People who equate truth with historical fact will certainly end up viewing the Bible dismissively, as a naïve and unsophisticated web of lies, since it is replete with elements that cannot be literally true. But to view it this way is to make a genre mistake. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, while set in Denmark, an actual place, is not historical fact. But that doesn't make it a naïve and unsophisticated web of lies, because we accept when we read or watch *Hamlet* that it is not a work of historiography, a work of writing about history. It is a work of literature. And in deference to that genre and its conventions, we know and accept that the truths it conveys are not those of historical fact, but are social, political, ethical, existential truths. And the Bible deserves at least the same courteous attention to its genre.

[11] The Bible doesn't pretend to be and it shouldn't be read as what we would call "objective history" — and see the scare quotes, you should be looking up here so you'll see the scare quotes: "objective history" — in other words perhaps, a bare narration of events. To be sure, we do find that some events that are mentioned in the biblical texts correlate to events that we know of from sources outside the Bible. So for example, Pharaoh Shishak's invasion of Palestine in 924. This is mentioned in the biblical text, it's mentioned in the Egyptian sources — there's a nice correlation. The destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722, the capture of

Jerusalem in 597, the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 586 — these are all recorded in the biblical text and they are in Assyrian and Babylonian records as well; as well as other events from the period of the monarchy. So as a result, because of these correlations, many scholars are willing to accept the general biblical chronology of the period from the monarchy on: starting about 1000 on, they accept that general chronology; the sequence of kings and battles and so on.

[12] But ultimately, it is a mistake, I think, to read the Bible as a historical record. The Bible is literature. Its composition is influenced and determined by literary conventions and goals. Now, of course we all know that there is no such thing as purely objective history anyway. We have no direct access to past events. We only ever have mediated access in material: archaeological remains that yield information to us only after a process of interpretation, or in texts that are themselves already an interpretation of events and must still be interpreted by us. The biblical narrative is an interpretation of events that were held by centuries' long tradition to be meaningful in the life of the people. And to the biblical narrators, these events known perhaps from ancient oral traditions pointed to a divine purpose. The narrative is told to illustrate that basic proposition. The biblical narrators are not trying to write history as a modern historian might try to write history. They're concerned to show us what they believed to be the finger of God in the events and experiences of the Israelite people.

[13] One scholar, Marc Brettler, whose name I've also put up here, Marc Brettler notes that in the Bible, the past is refracted through a theological lens if not a partisan political, ideological lens [Brettler 2005, 22]. But then all ancient historical narrative is written that way, and one could argue all contemporary historical narrative is written that way. With due caution, we can still learn things from texts ancient and modern. We can still learn things about Israel's history from the biblical sources, just as classical historians have learned a great deal about classical history, Greece and Rome, despite or through the tendentious, partisan and ideologically motivated writings of classical writers.

2. *Divine Command and Divine Promise:
Truths Freed from the Burden of Historicity*

[14] So our discussion of the patriarchal stories is going to bear all of these considerations in mind. We're not going to be asking whether these stories are historically accurate. I'm going to assume they are not. And once we rid ourselves of the burden of historicity, we're free to appreciate the stories for what they are: powerful, powerful narratives that must be read against the literary conventions of their time, and whose truths are social, political, moral and existential.

[15] So what are these truths? We'll begin to answer this question — begin to answer this question, you'll spend the rest of your life finishing the process of answering this question. But we'll begin by identifying some, by no means all, of the major themes of Genesis 12 through 50. And we're going to begin with the story of Terah and his family. This is a story that's marked by the themes of divine command and divine promise. Now, the biblical writer represents the emigration of Terah's son Abram, whose name will be changed to Abraham, so sometimes I'll say one and sometimes the other. But they represent this emigration as divinely commanded. It's the first step in a journey that will lead ultimately to the formation of a nation in covenant with God. First we meet our cast of characters. This is in Genesis 11:27 on through chapter 12:3.

[16] Now these are the generations of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran begot Lot. Haran died in the lifetime of his father Terah, in his native land, Ur of the Chaldeans. And Abram and Nahor took them wives, the name of Abram's wife being Sarai [who will become Sarah]; and the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah.... And Sarai was barren; she had no child. Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai, his daughter in law, his son Abram's wife; [getting confused yet?] and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there. And the days of Terah were 205 years: then Terah died in Haran. Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred, and your father's house, to the land

that I will show you." I will make of you a great nation,

[17] And I will bless you;

[18] And make your name great

[19] So that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you, I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves [source unknown].

[20] So Abram is commanded to go forth from his home and family to a location to be named later, a location that remains for now unspecified. And this is a fact that has caused commentators for centuries to praise Abram for his faith. That is a virtue — faith is a virtue — that is connected or associated with Abram/Abraham in other biblical contexts and also in later religious tradition. He is seen as the paradigm, the paradigmatic exemplar of a man of faith. The command is coupled with a promise: "I will make of you," God says, "a great nation, and I will bless you." But, we have just learned in chapter 11 that Sarai is barren. It was a seemingly irrelevant detail, whose import is suddenly clear. How clever of the narrator to plant the information we need to realize that Abram has to take God's word on faith, and how perfectly the narrator sets up the dramatic tension and the great confusion that is going to run through the next several chapters, because Abram doesn't seem to understand that the progeny will come from Sarai. You have to read these stories as if you're reading them for the first time. You have the great disadvantage of knowing the ending. It's a terrible disadvantage. You have to discipline yourself to read these stories as if you don't know what's coming next and put yourself in the position of the character. Abram's just been told he's going to be the father of great nations and he has a barren wife. He doesn't seem to understand that the progeny is going to come from Sarai, and why should he think that it would? God wasn't specific. He simply says, "I shall make of you a great nation." He says nothing of Sarai, and after all she's barren. So Abram may be forgiven for thinking that perhaps some other mate awaits him. And so he surrenders her easily to other men, to Pharaoh of Egypt immediately following this scene in chapter 11 [and 12]; immediately after that, in Egypt, he surrenders her. He willingly accepts Sarai's offer of a handmaid, Hagar, to bear a child Ishmael, in

Sarai's place. How cleverly the narrator leads us with Abram to pin our hopes on Ishmael as the child of the promise. And how cleverly is the carpet pulled out from under our feet in Genesis 17, when God finally, perhaps impatiently, talks specifics: No, I meant that you would father a great nation through Sarah. And Abraham, as he's now called, is incredulous: "She's past the age of bearing, Lord." And he laughs. And God is silent. And in that silence I always imagine that this light goes on: this click, this awful, sickening light. And Abraham says, O, that Ishmael might live in your sight! Or something like that. I think I probably misquoted. "O, that Ishmael might live by your favor" — sorry, that's the actual words. But God is determined. Sarah will bear Isaac and with him God will make an everlasting covenant.

[21] All of this drama through the first five chapters made possible by a seemingly irrelevant line in 11:30, a sort of throw-away datum in a family list that one might gloss over: "and Sarai was barren; she had no child." And that's the power and beauty of biblical narrative. You have to get yourself into the mindset to read it that way.

[22] A few verses later, when Abram and his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot and those traveling with them all reach Canaan, God makes an additional promise. He says in verse 7, "I will assign this land to your offspring." So in just a few short verses — we've just gone from 12, we've just gone seven verses now into chapter 12 — in just a few short verses, the writer has established the three-fold promise that underpins the biblical drama that's about to unfold: the promise of progeny, of blessing, and of land. And that establishes a narrative tension for the stories of the patriarchs, but also for the story of the nation of Israel in subsequent books. Because in the patriarchal stories, there is this suspenseful vacillation between episodes that threaten to extinguish God's promises and episodes that reaffirm them. Israelite matriarchs seem to be a singularly infertile group. The lines of inheritance defy our expectations: it doesn't seem to go to the person that we think that it's going to go to. The process by which the promise is fulfilled is halting and torturous at times. We're going to look at one example of an episode in which the promise is affirmed — or confirmed, reaffirmed — and an example of an episode in which the promise is supremely threatened.

3. *The Covenant between God and Abraham*

[23] In Genesis 15, God's promise to Abraham is formalized in a ritual ceremony. God and Abraham are said to "cut" a covenant — that's the verb that's used in making a covenant — and "covenant" is a central biblical concept. The Hebrew word for covenant, which I've written over here is *berit*. It means vow, promise, perhaps contract, agreement or pact. Parallels to the biblical covenant have been pointed out by many Ancient Near Eastern historians and scholars. We have in our Ancient Near Eastern texts — and we'll come back to these in more detail when we get into Exodus — we have in our Ancient Near Eastern texts, two types, two main types of covenant: the suzerainty covenant and the parity covenant. As you can imagine from the name, a suzerainty covenant is a covenant in which a superior party, a suzerain, dictates the terms of a political treaty usually, and an inferior party obeys them. The arrangement primarily serves the interest of the suzerain, and not the vassal or the subject. In a parity covenant, you have really two equal parties who both agree to observe the provisions of some kind of treaty.

[24] Now, there are four major covenants in the Hebrew Bible. They're initiated by Yahweh as expressions of divine favor and graciousness. And two of these appear in Genesis. We've already seen one, the Noahide covenant; and the Abrahamic covenant, which we're looking at now. Now, the Noahide covenant in Genesis 9:1-17 is universal in scope. It encompasses all life on earth. It stresses the sanctity of life and in this covenant, God promises never to destroy all life again. By contrast, the Abrahamic covenant is a covenant with a single individual. So we've gone from a covenant with all of humanity to a covenant with a single individual. And it looks very much like an Ancient Near Eastern suzerainty covenant. God appears as a suzerain. He's making a land grant to a favored subject, which is very often how these work. And there's an ancient ritual that ratifies the oath. In general, in this kind of covenant, the parties to the oath would pass between the split carcass of a sacrificial animal as if to say that they agree they will suffer the same fate as this animal if they violate the covenant. In Genesis 15, Abraham cuts sacrificial animals in two and God, but only God, passes between the two halves.

[25] The striking thing about the Abrahamic covenant is its unilateral character. Only God seems to be obligated by the covenant, obligated to fulfill the promise that he's made. Abraham doesn't appear to have any obligation in return. And so in this case, it is the subject, Abraham, and not the suzerain, God, who is benefited by this covenant, and that's a complete reversal of our expectation. Note also that the biblical writer goes out of his way to provide a moral justification for this grant of land to Israel. In the biblical writer's view, God is the owner of the land, and so he is empowered to set conditions or residency requirements for those who would reside in it, like a landlord. The current inhabitants of the land are polluting it, filling it with bloodshed and idolatry. And when the land becomes so polluted, completely polluted, it will spew out its inhabitants. That process, God says, isn't complete; so Israel is going to have to wait. The lease isn't up yet, and the Israelites will have to wait. He says in Genesis 15:16, the iniquity of the Amorites will not be fulfilled until then. So here, and in other places in the Bible, it's clear that God's covenant with Israel is not due to any special merit of the Israelites or favoritism: this is actually said explicitly in Deuteronomy. Rather, God is seeking replacement tenants who are going to follow the moral rules of residence that he has established for his land.

[26] Genesis 17 seems to be a second version of the same covenant. This time, scholars attribute it to P — the Priestly writer, the P source. There are some notable differences, emphasizing themes that were important to the Priestly writer. God adds to the promises in Genesis 17 that a line of kings will come forth from Abraham, and then, that Abraham and his male descendents be circumcised as a perpetual sign of the covenant. So here there is some obligation for Abraham. "Thus shall my covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact" [Gen 17:13]. Failure to circumcise is tantamount to breaking the covenant, according to the text. Now, circumcision is known in many of the cultures of the Ancient Near East. It's generally a rite of passage that was performed at the time of puberty rather than a ritual that was performed at birth, [or] eight days after birth. So that's unusual in the Israelite context to have it occur with infants. But as is the case with so many biblical rituals or institutions or laws, whatever their original meaning or significance in the

ancient world, whether this was originally a puberty rite or a fertility rite of some kind, the ritual has been suffused with a new meaning in our texts. So circumcision is here infused with a new meaning: it becomes a sign of God's eternal covenant with Abraham and his seed.

4. *The Story of Isaac*

[27] These texts are typical of affirmations of God's promise. But despite them, the patriarchal episodes or stories are peppered with episodes in which the realization of the promise and the blessing is threatened. In chapter 12, Abram surrenders his wife Sarai to Pharaoh in order to advance his position among the Egyptians, plausibly not knowing that it is Sarai who is supposed to bear the child of God's promise. As I said, that's left unclear until chapter 17, when God says: No, no, no, you misunderstood. I meant Sarai. God intervenes, however, and returns Sarai to Abraham. Sarai's barren state really casts a shadow over the promise from the very beginning of the story of Abraham and Sarah. Desperate, Sarah takes advantage of the custom that is attested in the ancient world of giving her Egyptian handmaid, Hagar, to Abraham to bear a child in her stead. But Hagar apparently lords this over her mistress, and an embittered Sarah forces her from the house. Hagar and her child Ishmael cry out to God in the wilderness and God assures Hagar that Ishmael, who's regarded by Muslims as the ancestor of the Arabs and the inheritor of the blessing and the promise, that Ishmael shall become a great nation too [see note 1]. But really the greatest threat to the promise comes from God himself, and that is in Genesis 22 when God tests Abraham with the most horrible of demands. The child of the promise, Isaac, who was born miraculously to Sarah when she was no longer of child-bearing age, is to be sacrificed to God by Abraham's own hand. And the story of the binding of Isaac is one of the most powerful, most riveting stories not only in the Bible but, some have claimed, in all of world literature.

[28] The story is a marvelous exemplar of the biblical narrator's literary skill and artistry. This week's assigned reading includes selections from Robert Alter's book, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, which I heartily recommend to read in its entirety. Alter describes the extreme

economy of biblical narrative, economy in the description of physical settings and character as well as speech. Rarely does the narrator comment on or explain a character's actions or thoughts or motives. There's only the barest minimum of dialogue. And on the few occasions that the Bible will violate this principle of verbal economy — for example if two characters converse at length — you can be sure it's significant. You'll want to pay extra attention. The biblical narrator's concealing of details and the motives of the characters, God and Abraham and Isaac, leads to ambiguity, and the possibility of very many interpretations. And that is a striking characteristic of biblical prose: its suppression of detail, its terse, laconic style. That makes the little that is given so powerful, so "fraught with background" to use the phrase of Eric Auerbach, whose article you are also to read this week. Auerbach contrasts the literary style of Homer with the biblical writer's style specifically in connection with the story of Genesis 22.

[29] The ambiguities and the indeterminacy of this story make it one of the most interpreted texts of all time. Why is God testing Abraham? Does God really desire such a sacrifice? What is Abraham thinking and feeling as he walks — for three days, already — walks with his son, bearing the wood and the fire for the sacrifice? Does he fully intend to obey this command, to annul the covenantal promise with his own hand? Or does he trust in God to intervene? Or is this a paradox of faith? Does Abraham intend faithfully to obey, all the while trusting faithfully that God's promise will nevertheless be fulfilled? What's Isaac thinking? Does he understand what is happening? How old is he? Is this a little boy or a grown man? Is he prepared to obey? He sees the wood and the firestone in his father's hand. Clearly a sacrifice is planned. He's got three days to figure that out. He asks his father: Where is the sheep for the burnt offering? Does he know the answer even as he asks? Does he hear the double entendre in his father's very simple and solemn reply, which in the unpunctuated Hebrew might be read, "The lord will provide the sheep for the offering: my son." Does he struggle when he's bound? Does he acquiesce?

[30] The beauty of the narrative is its sheer economy. It offers so little that we as readers are forced to imagine the innumerable possibilities. We play out the drama in countless ways, with an

Abraham who's reluctant and an Isaac who's ignorant. Or an Abraham who's eager to serve his God to the point of sacrificing his own son, and an Isaac who willingly bares his neck to the knife. Read the story one verse, one phrase, one word at a time. There are so few words that you can be sure that they were chosen with care. You'll be looking at Genesis 22 closely in your section discussions. And as you read the story, remember its larger context: God's promise to make Abraham the father of a great people through his son, Isaac. It's this context, this promise, that gives the story its special power and pathos.

[31] But of course the story can be contextualized in a number of different ways. For example, one can read the story in its historical context of child sacrifice in the Ancient Near East. Although child sacrifice was adamantly condemned in various later layers of the Bible, there's plenty of evidence that it was probably practiced in different quarters throughout the period of the monarchy. Does Genesis 22 assume or reject the practice of child sacrifice? Some scholars argue that a core story promoting child sacrifice has been edited so as to serve as a polemic against child sacrifice now in its final form. Do you think so? Can you see the seams and feel the narrative tensions that would support such a claim? Does the story pull in more than one direction?

[32] Or we can read the story in its immediate literary context. Abraham has just permitted the expulsion of Ishmael, the only beloved son of Hagar. And now God demands that he sacrifice his beloved son. What might he be trying to teach Abraham? Is this a trial in the sense of a test or a trial in the sense of a punishment? The Hebrew term can tolerate both meanings.

[33] Or Genesis 22 can be contextualized another way. And at this point, we need to backtrack a little bit to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, which is in Genesis 18 and 19, to contextualize the story a little bit, in terms of Abraham's character development. In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, in Genesis 18 and 19, Yahweh tells Abraham of his plan to investigate reports of the wickedness of the city, the Canaanite city of Sodom — its violence, its cruelty to strangers — and to destroy it. And Abraham's reaction comes as something of a surprise. He objects to the plan, and he starts to argue with God. "Will you sweep away the innocent along with the

guilty? Shall not the judge of all the earth deal justly?” That’s in Genesis 18:23-25. The question is of course rhetorical. Abraham is evidently quite confident that God would not act unjustly, would not destroy the innocent along with the wicked. Indeed, Abraham is banking on the fact that God is merciful and will overlook evil for the sake of righteous individuals. And so Abraham haggles with God for the lives of the innocent:

[34] “...Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” And the Lord answered, “If I find within the city of Sodom fifty innocent ones, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.” Abraham spoke up, saying, “Here I venture to speak to my Lord, I who am but dust and ashes: What if the fifty innocent should lack five? Will You destroy the whole city for want of the five?” And He answered, “I will not destroy if I find forty-five there.” But he spoke to Him again, and said, “What if forty should be found there?” And He answered, “I will not do it, for the sake of the forty.” And he said, “Let not my Lord be angry if I go on: What if thirty should be found there?”

[35] And in this way, Abraham manages to whittle the number down to ten: “And God answers, ‘I will not destroy for the sake of the ten.’”

[36] But ten innocent men are not found. The narrator makes that very clear. He takes pains to point out that the mob that comes to abuse the two divine visitors includes all the people to the last man: very clear statement. So Sodom and its four sister cities of the plain, around the Dead Sea, are destroyed. But out of consideration for Abraham, Abraham’s nephew Lot is saved. Genesis 19:29: “God was mindful of Abraham and removed Lot from the midst of the upheaval.” Now, this text is often identified as the source for the doctrine of the merit of the righteous, which is the idea that someone who is not righteous is spared for the sake of, or on account of, the accrued merit of one who is righteous. So Lot himself is no prize, but he is spared on Abraham’s account. This is an idea that will have repercussions in later biblical thought.

[37] In this story, we see Abraham rising to the defense of a thoroughly wicked and reprehensible group of people, arguing quite pointedly that the innocent should never be wantonly destroyed. Can this be the same

Abraham who a few chapters later, when told to slaughter his only son, his perfectly innocent and presumably deeply loved son, not only makes no objection, but rises early in the morning to get started on the long journey to the sacrificial site? What are we to make of the juxtaposition of these two stories? Which represents behavior more desirable to God?

[38] Before leaving this story, I just want to make two quick comments. First, I’ve included in your reading packet, and it’s uploaded on the [Yale College course] website, a very interesting article by a writer who relates her efforts since childhood to understand why Lot’s wife should have been turned into a pillar of salt as punishment for looking back as she fled from her burning home [Goldstein 1994, 3-12]. It’s not a biblical scholar, but someone who’s simply reacting to the text. Was this, in fact, a punishment, or was it a mercy? Second, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah has often been cited as a biblical condemnation of homosexuality, as if the Sodomites were condemned to destruction because of homosexual behavior. In fact the very terms “sodomy” and “sodomize” represent this interpretation. But the idea that the fundamental sin of Sodom was homosexual behavior is not present in the Hebrew Bible. It appears only in later documents. It’s found in the Christian New Testament, in the book of Jude 7:2; the book of Peter 2:6-10; and subsequent interpretations. The Sodomites, like the generation of the Flood, stand condemned by the “outcry against them,” a particular Hebrew word that’s used to refer to outcry. It’s a term that’s generally associated with the appeal of victims of violent oppression, bloodshed, injustice. God hears this outcry of victims, against the Sodomites: the Sodomites’ violation of the unwritten desert law of hospitality to strangers, their violent desire to abuse and gang rape the strangers that they should have been sheltering. This is merely one instance of a pattern of violent brutality.

[39] Now, Isaac, who is the child of God’s promise to Abraham, is often described as the most invisible of the patriarchs or the most passive of the patriarchs. Perhaps his passive acceptance of his father’s effort to sacrifice him serves as the key to the biblical narrator’s perception of his character. By contrast, his wife Rebekah is often described as the most determined and energetic of the matriarchs. She runs to extend hospitality to a stranger. She quickly draws water for him.

She quickly draws water for his camels and waters them all. She seems to run everywhere, and she does all this not knowing that the man she greets is the servant of Abraham who has come to seek a wife for his master's son, Isaac. Rebekah herself personally, accepts the offer of an unknown bridegroom in a far away land and overrides the urgings of her mother and her brother to delay her departure. No, she says, I'm ready to go. I'll go now. There's a very moving conclusion to the betrothal story. We read in Genesis 24:67 that Isaac brought Rebekah "into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her and thus found comfort after his mother's death."

5. *Jacob the Trickster*

[40] But like the other matriarchs, Rebekah is barren. So Isaac pleads with the lord for a child on her behalf. And Rebekah becomes pregnant with twins. The older child is Esau — Esau will be the father of the Edomites — and the younger is Jacob, who will be the father of the Israelites. Now, Jacob is the most fully developed, the most colorful and the most complex of the patriarchs. Jacob has long been identified by commentators as the classic trickster, a type that we know from folklore. Marc Brettler has described the Jacob stories as a kind of morality tale, the main message of which is "trick and you shall be tricked" [Brettler 2005, 51]. Jacob tricks his brother out of his birthright, and in turn is tricked by his brother-in-law, his wife and later his own sons. How much of Jacob's trickery is really necessary? After all, Rebekah, who suffers tremendous pain during her pregnancy, is told by God that the twins who are fighting and struggling for priority in her womb will become two nations, the older of which will serve the younger. That happens in Genesis 25:23. "Two nations are in your womb; two separate peoples shall issue from your body; one people shall be mightier than the other; and the older shall serve the younger." And indeed, the real life nations of Israel and Edom were long-time enemies — Esau is the father of the Edomites according to the biblical texts — and for a time, Edom was subjugated by Israel, according to the biblical texts, under King David.

[41] Some scholars, like Nahum Sarna have argued that this announcement, that the older shall serve

the younger is the narrator's way of establishing for the reader that the younger child, Jacob, is the son who will inherit the divine blessing, and that that then raises serious questions about Rebekah and Jacob's morally dubious efforts to wrest the blessing and birthright from Esau. Are we supposed to be comforted by the fact that they are fulfilling a divine plan? Are we supposed to conclude that it's alright to fulfill a divine plan by any means, fair or foul? Or are we to conclude, as Sarna and others suggest, that Jacob's possession of the birthright was predetermined, it was disengaged from all of his acts of trickery? And if so, then Jacob's efforts are indicative of a deceitful and narcissistic personality? He takes advantage of Esau's hunger, offering him a pot of lentil stew in exchange for the birthright. He and Rebekah plot to deceive Isaac in his dotage into bestowing the blessing of the firstborn on Jacob instead of Esau. So perhaps by informing us that Jacob had been chosen from the womb, the narrator is able to paint a portrait of Jacob at this stage in his life as grasping and faithless: a great contrast to his grandfather, Abraham.

[42] Now, Jacob's poor treatment of his brother, Esau, earns him Esau's enmity and Jacob finds it expedient to leave Canaan and remain at the home of his mother's brother, Laban. On his way east, back to Mesopotamia from Canaan, where Laban resides, in Mesopotamia, Jacob has an encounter with God. At a place called Luz, Jacob lies down to sleep, resting his head on a stone. And he has a dream in which he sees a ladder. The ladder's feet are on the earth, it reaches to heaven and there are angels ascending and descending on the ladder. In the dream, God appears to Jacob and reaffirms the Abrahamic or patriarchal covenant. He promises land, posterity and in addition, Jacob's own safety, his own personal safety until he returns to the land of Israel. Jacob is stunned: we read in Genesis 28:16-17: "Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is [present] in this place; and I did not know it.' / Shaken, he said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven.'" The stone that served as his pillow, he then sets up as a cultic pillar, some sort of memorial stone. He sanctifies the stone with oil and he renames the site Bethel, Beyt El, which means the house of God.

[43] But it's significant that despite this direct vision, Jacob, so unlike Abraham, is still reluctant to

rely on God and his promise. And he makes a conditional vow:

[44] If God remains with me, if He protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and if I return safe to my father's house — the Lord shall be my God. And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God's abode; and of all that You give me, I will set aside a tithe for You.

[45] So where once God had tested Abraham, it seems now that Jacob is almost testing God. If you can do all this, fine: you can be my God.

[46] Well, Jacob spends some 14 years in the household of his uncle, his mother's brother, Laban. And Jacob meets Laban's two daughters: Leah is the elder daughter and Rachel is the younger. And he soon loves Rachel. He agrees to serve Laban for seven years for the hand of the younger daughter Rachel. When the seven years pass, Laban deceives Jacob and gives him the elder daughter, Leah. Jacob, the trickster, is furious at having been tricked himself, and in much the same way — an older and a younger sibling, one disguised as the other or wearing the covering of the other, just as he tricked his own father. But he is willing to give seven years more service for Rachel. Rachel, Leah, and their two handmaidens will conceive one daughter and 12 sons, from whom will come the 12 tribes of Israel. But it's the two sons of Rachel, the beloved wife, the two sons of Rachel, Joseph and Benjamin, who are the most beloved to Jacob.

[47] Jacob determines finally to leave Laban and return to Canaan. There's one final remarkable incident in Jacob's life that occurs on his return journey. It's an incident that most readers associate with a significant transformation in his character, and that is Jacob's nighttime struggle with a mysterious figure, who in some way is representative of God. This struggle occurs as he is about to cross the river Jabbok and reconcile himself with his former rival and enemy, Esau. Jacob has sent everyone on ahead: his wives, his children, his household, his possessions. He's standing alone at the river. And we read, Genesis 32:25-33.:

[48] ... a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained

as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." But he answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob." Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and men, and have prevailed." Jacob asked, "Pray tell me your name." But he said, "You must not ask my name!" And he took leave of him there. So Jacob named the place Peniel, meaning, "I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping on his hip.

[49] Many scholars, Michael Coogan and others, see this story as an Israelite adaptation of popular stories of river gods who threaten those who wish to cross a river, or trolls or ogres who guard rivers and have to be defeated by a hero, making the river safe to cross. In its Israelite version, however, this story is historicized. It serves an etiological function. It's associated with one particular character at a historical time and it serves to explain why the Israelites abstained from eating the sciatic nerve of an animal even to this day. We also learn how Peniel gets its name. We learn how Israel gets his name. Names are an important theme of this story. In the biblical context, names encapsulate the essence of their bearer. Naming something or knowing the name of something gives one control over, or power over, that thing. And that's why the stranger will not reveal his name to Jacob. It would give Jacob power over him.

[50] Jacob's own name is the occasion for some punning in this story. His name is built on this root Y.'Q.B: Ya-'a-qov It means to supplant or uproot. He emerges from the womb grasping his brother's heel. 'aqev here [on the board], the word for "heel," is based on that root. It's part of his effort to supplant Esau right at birth, and he continues that effort at supplanting through his early life. The writer makes that explicit in Genesis 27:36 when Esau cries out, "Was he then named Ya'aqov that he might supplant me these two times?" Yes. And in this chapter, Jacob wrestles. The word for wrestle is built on this root, just switching two letters [Y.'B.Q]. He wrestles with the mysterious, divine being at the Jabbok [Y.B.Q.] river. So you see all of this punning with the name. Jacob's very name hints at and foreshadows the struggling, the wrestling, the trickery that are the major themes of his life. But his striving has reached a climax here. And

so the angel names him Yisra'el, Israel, which means he who has striven with God. Because as the stranger says, he has striven and wrestled all his life with men, particularly his brother, and now with God. El means god. It's the name of the chief god of the pantheon of Canaan. Yisra'el, he who has struggled with God. We'll talk about the way in which the change of name means a change of character, change of essence for the patriarch when we return.

[51] [end of transcript]

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[52] Notes

[53] 1. This promise comes after the second expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, in chapter 21.

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[54] References

[55] Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations have been quoted from "Tanakh: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text." Copyright (c) 1985 by The Jewish Publication Society. Single copies of the JPS biblical citations cited within the transcripts can be reproduced for personal and non-commercial uses only.

[56] Goldstein, R. 1994. Looking Back at Lot's Wife. In *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible*, ed. Buchmann, C. and Spiegel C. New York: Fawcett Columbine.

[57] Brettler, Marc Zvi. 2005. *How to Read the Bible*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.