



# GENESIS

PART ONE



Providing a strong foundation in Scripture

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ISBN: 978-0-8146-6395-0



# Genesis

## Part One

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Genesis 1:1–25:18

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**Joan E. Cook**

with Little Rock Scripture Study staff



*A ministry of the Diocese of Little Rock  
in partnership with Liturgical Press*

*Nihil obstat* for the commentary text by Joan E. Cook: Reverend Robert C. Harren, *Censor deputatus*.  
*Imprimatur* for the commentary text by Joan E. Cook: † Most Reverend John F. Kinney, Bishop of St. Cloud, Minnesota, December 17, 2010.

Cover design by Ann Blattner. Interior art by Ned Bustard.

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### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Cook, Joan E.

Title: Genesis / Joan E. Cook with Little Rock Scripture Study staff.

Other titles: Bible. Genesis. English. New American. 2018.

Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press, 2018— | Series: Little Rock Scripture Study.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018028646 (print) | LCCN 2018047300 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814663950 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814663707 (pt. one) | ISBN 9780814663714 (pt. two)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Genesis—Textbooks. | Bible. Genesis—Study and teaching—Catholic Church. | Catholic Church—Doctrines.

Classification: LCC BS1233 (ebook) | LCC BS1233 .N43 2018 (print) | DDC 222/.11052056—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018028646>



Office of the Bishop

## DIOCESE OF LITTLE ROCK

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Dear Friends,

The Bible is a gift of God to the church, the people gathered around the world throughout the ages in the name of Christ. God uses this sacred writing to continue to speak to us in all times and places.

I encourage you to make it your own by dedicated prayer and study with others and on your own. Little Rock Scripture Study is a ministry of the Catholic Diocese of Little Rock. It provides the tools you need to faithfully understand what you are reading, to appreciate its meaning for you and for our world, and to guide you in a way that will deepen your own ability to respond to God's call.

It is my hope that the Word of God will empower you as Christians to live a life worthy of your call as a child of God.

Sincerely in Christ,

✠ Anthony B. Taylor  
Bishop of Little Rock



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# Welcome

The Bible is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. It is the Spirit-inspired word of God for us. It reveals to us the God who created, redeemed, and guides us still. It speaks to us personally and as a church. It forms the basis of our public liturgical life and our private prayer lives. It urges us to live worthily and justly, to love tenderly and wholeheartedly, and to be a part of building God's kingdom here on earth.

Though it was written a long time ago, in the context of a very different culture, the Bible is no relic of the past. Catholic biblical scholarship is among the best in the world, and in our time and place, we have unprecedented access to it. By making use of solid scholarship, we can discover much about the ancient culture and religious practices that shaped those who wrote the various books of the Bible. With these insights, and by praying with the words of Scripture, we allow the words and images to shape us as disciples. By sharing our journey of faithful listening to God's word with others, we have the opportunity to be stretched in our understanding and to form communities of love and learning. Ultimately, studying and praying with God's word deepens our relationship with Christ.

## **Genesis, Part One** **Genesis 1:1–25:18**

The resource you hold in your hands is divided into five lessons. Each lesson involves personal prayer and study using this book *and* the experience of group prayer, discussion, and wrap-up lecture.


If you are using this resource in the context of a small group, we suggest that you meet five times, discussing one lesson per meeting. Allow about 90 minutes for the small group gathering. Small groups function best with eight to twelve people to ensure good group dynamics and to allow all to participate as they wish.

### WHAT MATERIALS WILL YOU USE?

The materials in this book include:

- The text of Genesis, chapters 1:1–25:18, using the New American Bible, Revised Edition as the translation.



- Commentary by Joan E. Cook (which has also been published separately as part of the New Collegeville Bible Commentary series).
- Occasional inserts  highlighting elements of the chapters of Genesis being studied. Some of these appear also in the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible* while others are supplied by staff writers.
- Questions for study, reflection, and discussion at the end of each lesson.
- Opening and closing prayers for each lesson, as well as other prayer forms available in the closing pages of the book.

In addition, there are wrap-up lectures available for each lesson. Your group may choose to purchase a DVD containing these lectures or make use of the audio or video lectures online at no charge. The link to these free lectures is: [LittleRockScripture.org/Lectures/GenesisPartOne](http://LittleRockScripture.org/Lectures/GenesisPartOne). Of course, if your group has access to qualified speakers, you may choose to have live presentations.

Each person will need a current translation of the Bible. We recommend the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible*, which makes use of the New American Bible, Revised Edition. Other translations, such as the New Jerusalem Bible or the New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition, would also work well.

## HOW WILL YOU USE THESE MATERIALS?

### **Prepare in advance**

Using Lesson One as an example:

- Begin with a simple prayer like the one found on page 11.
- Read the assigned material in the printed book for Lesson One (pages 12–22) so that you are prepared for the weekly small group session. You may do this assignment by reading a portion over a period of several days (effective and manageable) or by preparing all at once (more challenging).
- Answer the questions, Exploring Lesson One, found at the end of the assigned reading, pages 23–24.
- Use the Closing Prayer on page 25 when you complete your study. This prayer may be used again when you meet with the group.



## Meet with your small group

- After introductions and greetings, allow time for prayer (about 5 minutes) as you begin the group session. You may use the prayer found on page 11 (also used by individuals in their preparation) or use a prayer of your choosing.
- Spend about 45–50 minutes discussing the responses to the questions that were prepared in advance. You may also develop your discussion further by responding to questions and interests that arise during the discussion and faith-sharing itself.
- Close the discussion and faith-sharing with prayer, about 5–10 minutes. You may use the Closing Prayer at the end of each lesson or one of your choosing at the end of the book. It is important to allow people to pray for personal and community needs and to give thanks for how God is moving in your lives.
- Listen to or view the wrap-up lecture associated with each lesson (15–20 minutes). You may watch the lecture online, use a DVD, or provide a live lecture by a qualified local speaker. This lecture provides a common focus for the group and reinforces insights from each lesson. You may view the lecture together at the end of the session or, if your group runs out of time, you may invite group members to watch the lecture on their own time after the discussion.

*Above all, be aware that the Holy Spirit is moving within and among you.*

# Genesis

## Part One

### LESSON ONE

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#### Introduction and Genesis 1–3

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Begin your personal study and group discussion with a simple and sincere prayer such as:

#### *Prayer*

*O God of creation, be with me in my study and reflection, and continue to create in me a hunger for your voice.*

Read the Introduction on pages 12–15 and the Bible text of Genesis 1–3 found in the outside columns of pages 16–22, highlighting what stands out to you.

Read the accompanying commentary to add to your understanding.

Respond to the questions on pages 23–24, Exploring Lesson One.

The Closing Prayer on page 25 is for your personal use and may be used at the end of group discussion.

## INTRODUCTION

Genesis is a story about beginnings: of the universe, of humans, of joys and sorrows, successes and failures. The book focuses on the relationships between God and people as well as those among different people. These themes are simple in principle, but often complex in our lives. While the themes of Genesis are universal they can be complex because they are expressed in the styles and settings of the ancient Near East. Before we look at the book itself, several introductory points will facilitate our reading of Genesis.

### **Themes**

Genesis introduces several themes that permeate the entire Bible. The first of these is divine causality; that is, the ancient people believed that the deities caused everything that happened in life. The ancient Israelites came to believe in only one God, whose name they eventually learned was Lord or “I AM” (Exod 3:14). They believed that the one God who caused everything to happen took a special interest in them. This divine-human relationship was understood as essential, and it applied not only to the relationship between God and the people, but also among people.

An implication of the importance of relationships is the setting of boundaries between God and creatures, including human beings, and between different creatures. The boundaries involved right relationships among all creatures and also between humans and God. In addition, boundaries factored into the topic of land and the possession of land. Finally, intimately connected to the theme of relationship is the theme of promise and blessing. The Creator promises to remember and care for all creation, and carries out that promise in spite of the many ways that creatures violate divinely set boundaries.

### **Ancient storytelling**

Another important topic is the way in which ancient people expressed their beliefs and values and told their story: it is quite different from

the way we today record our past. We strive to record information with great attention to the details of the event, such as when and where it took place, who was involved, what they did and said. Then we use these details in our efforts to interpret the event we record. But in the ancient world, the project of remembering the past took a different form. People were not as concerned with recording the precise details of an event as they were in probing its meaning. To that end they told stories.

This means of communication was ideally suited to nonliterate cultures, peoples who depended on oral communication because very few could read and write. The stories they told embodied the larger meanings they found in situations and events, and related them in ways their listeners would remember and pass down to their descendants. In fact, we will note throughout Genesis that some events were recounted more than once, with different points of focus and emphasis. The variations were included because each one added to the meaning of the event, and to the overall picture of the people’s relationship with one another and with their God.

### **Ancient Near Eastern parallels**

Several Genesis stories have parallels in other ancient Near Eastern cultures. The best-known of these are the Mesopotamian creation myth called *Enuma Elish*, of which echoes can be seen in the Genesis creation stories, and a Mesopotamian myth about the quest for immortality called the Epic of Gilgamesh, of which traces are evident in the Genesis flood story. Other parts of Genesis include what appear to be allusions to ancient stories. The parallel stories provide plots and themes onto which the Genesis narratives superimposed the ancient Israelites’ beliefs. We will comment on *Enuma Elish* and the Epic of Gilgamesh in our discussion of the biblical creation and flood stories.

### **Documentary hypothesis**

As the ancient Near Eastern people continued to tell their stories throughout the genera-

tions, the stories took on characteristic themes and motifs typical of their particular geographical localities and political and socioeconomic situations. When the people eventually began to write down their stories, these particularities became part of the narrative. The process of recording the material was a complex one that extended over hundreds of years. In the past 150 years, scholars have studied this question and have developed a theory as to how the first five books of the Bible (also known as the Pentateuch, which includes the book of Genesis) developed into the form we have today. That theory is known as the Documentary Hypothesis. We will look at the contemporary understanding of this theory with regard to the book of Genesis, because an understanding of how the book probably came into its present form is helpful to an understanding of the book's content.

According to the theory, the process of setting the stories in writing took place over a period of several hundred years, from about 1000 B.C. to about 500 B.C. Before that the stories circulated by word of mouth in families and clans. Then around 1000 B.C. when David was King of Israel, he took steps to unite the twelve tribes into one people. One of those steps was to commission his scribes to write down the people's stories, weaving them into one. This early strand of Genesis (in fact, of the entire Pentateuch) is called J to represent the German spelling of the word Yahweh (Jahweh), the name by which this strand of the Pentateuch refers to God.

After King Solomon's death about one hundred years later, the kingdom David had established broke into two: the northern and southern kingdoms. The southern kingdom, Judah, believed it was the one that remained loyal to God and to the divine promises. The northern kingdom, Israel, set about establishing a new identity, and one of its steps was to rewrite parts of the early J story, inserting new details and substituting different names according to their own regional usage. This strand was woven into the earlier story, and the new strand became known as E because it calls God Elohim.

About five hundred years later, the city of Jerusalem and the entire southern kingdom of Judah endured a traumatic defeat by the Babylonians. They destroyed the temple, which had become the central place of worship. They also imprisoned the king and took into exile many leading members of the Jerusalem community. This defeat represented not only a political act but also the violation of the divine promises that had sustained the people since the time of Abraham and Sarah, over one thousand years before. The upheaval caused the people to rethink the beliefs that had sustained them throughout those one thousand years. The result was two additional strands. The first is known as D and represents the efforts of the people to understand their exile in terms of the message of the book of Deuteronomy: reliance on the covenant, or the formal terms of the relationship between God and the people. The D writers understood the exile as punishment for their own violation of the terms God had set down for the people. They believed that the exile was not a failure of the deity to keep the divine promises, but rather the failure of the people to live up to them.

Finally, a group of priests, also working to understand the meaning of the exile, preserved a record of how they had practiced their religion when it was centered in the Jerusalem temple. They did this because they saw the temple worship as the norm for public practice of religion. They wanted to preserve this record in the hope that one day they would return to Jerusalem, rebuild the temple, and resume temple worship according to the record they left for future generations. And if the exile did not end, at least there would be a record of how religion was practiced in the "good old days" of temple-centered religion. This strand is called P for the priestly authors who are believed to have written it. These last two groups, D and P, were probably not simply writers but also editors, who worked their strands into the earlier ones and gave the entire Pentateuch the shape we know today.

This summary gives an idea of the stages in the writing of Genesis. We can also categorize



the four strands in terms of their characteristic features. We have seen that the writers and editors used different names for the deity: the Yahwist, or J, used the term  $\text{YHWH}$ , the name God gave to Moses at the burning bush in response to Moses' request in Exodus 3:13-14. The Elohist, on the other hand, used the name Elohim, a term that originally meant "gods" and that ancient Israel used in referring to their own God. A shortened form of the word is "El," another term we find in Genesis. The editors we call P also used the term Elohim to refer to the deity.

The four sources have other characteristics, too. The J strand is the storytelling piece, with details that enable us to see, hear, and feel the events described in that strand of the narrative. Its descriptions of the deity are vivid and concrete: they describe God in ways that we humans can identify with, as we will see in Genesis 2. On the other hand, the E strand tends to focus on the transcendence of God, describing the divine presence in dreams and other ways that highlight the mysterious quality of divine presence and action. The D strand tends to be solemn and formal, and to emphasize the cause-and-effect quality of human actions while at the same time recognizing divine inbreakings in unexpected and surprising ways. Finally, the P strand focuses on concerns relating to the public practice of religion: the details of rituals, the place of different people within society, the relationships among different people that are often expressed in genealogical lists. Genesis is composed primarily of the J and P strands; we will point them out in the places where it enhances our understanding of the story.

### **Ancient literary genres**

Another element to consider in our reading of the book of Genesis is the ancient genres or types of writings that comprise the book. The people spoke and wrote according to the conventions of the day. There are three main types of writing that appear frequently in Genesis: myths, sagas, and genealogies. The first two are narrative forms. Myths, in the biblical

sense, are not make-believe stories. Rather, they are stories that convey the beliefs and values of the people. We will get a better idea of what this means when we look at the myths in the book. The other narrative genre, the saga, is a story that tells about the past and relates it to the present. The Genesis sagas tell about the beginnings of the world and about events within families. Sagas are predominantly the work of J.

The genealogies appear throughout the book, enumerating the relationships among different generations. These lists are among the latest parts of the book, added during or toward the end of the exile in Babylon to produce a record of who belonged to the group of exiles from Judah. Such a record served several important purposes: it established the record of the family ties of different people, identifying how they belonged to the chosen people. In addition, it supported the claims to the land that became vitally important when the exiles returned to their land and needed to legitimate their claim to it, because others had settled there in their absence. The genealogical lists are the work of P, and they not only identify the relationships among the different people, they also provide an organizing principle for the book of Genesis. We will look at these lists and the information we can learn from them.

By taking note of the three genres—myths, saga, and genealogy—we can understand what the Second Vatican Council document on revelation, *Dei Verbum*, meant in referring to the Bible as the word of God in human language. We believe that the Bible is the word of God, that is, revelation from God. At the same time we believe that it is recorded by human beings who put down the information in the ways people communicated with one another at the time the words were put into writing, according to the genres of the day.

Keeping all these facets in mind—the overall themes of Genesis; the lengthy process of recording and editing that brought the book to the form in which we know it today; the characteristics of the four different strands J, E, D, and P; the literary forms in which the ancient

writers and editors wrote their messages; and the ancient Near Eastern parallel literature—gives us useful tools for understanding the book of Genesis. Now let us look at the contents of the book.

### **Divisions of the book of Genesis**

The Genesis story consists of three parts. The first is the Primeval Story, the story of the earliest beginnings of the universe and of human beings on earth. It is found in chapters 1–11 of Genesis. The second part is the Ancestral Story, the story of several generations who became the ancestors of God's people. They were Abraham and Sarah; Rebekah and Isaac; Jacob and his two wives Leah and Rachel, their maids Bilhah and Zilpah, and their twelve sons and one daughter. This

part of the story is found in chapters 12–36. The final part of the Ancestral Story focuses on one of Jacob's sons, Joseph, and his adventures that resulted in the family of Jacob being given a privileged place in the land of Egypt. This part of the story is found in chapters 37–50.

As we read, we will keep in mind that we are looking simultaneously at two different historical periods: the time described and the time when the story was written down. The way in which each historical, or prehistoric, episode is recorded reflects not only the people's understanding of what happened but also the context in which they wrote: the political, economic, and religious concerns that were important at the time, and through which they found meaning in the ancient narrative.



**Preamble. The Creation of the World**

**CHAPTER 1**

*The Story of Creation*

<sup>1</sup>In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth—<sup>2</sup>and the earth was without form or shape, with darkness over the abyss and a mighty wind sweeping over the waters—

<sup>3</sup>Then God said: Let there be light, and there was light. <sup>4</sup>God saw that the light was good. God then separated the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup>God

*continue*



**THE PRIMEVAL STORY**

Genesis 1:1–11:28

The Primeval Story in Genesis 1–11 is the story of the earliest beginnings of the universe and of the human race. It talks of prehistoric times, naming a few places that we can identify today such as the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, but for the most part it recounts stories whose details we cannot identify with precision; often we can find parallel stories and themes in other ancient Near Eastern myths. The Primeval Story consists of two creation stories, followed by several examples of humans who missed the mark in their efforts to live up to the ideals of creation. The best known are the stories of Adam, Eve, and the serpent; the murder of Abel by his brother Cain; the Flood; and the tower of Babel. Each of these stories invites us to look at life’s challenges and how we respond to them as individuals and communities.

The Primeval Story takes us back to that primordial time when God created the world. Today we struggle to weigh different theories of how the universe came into being; whether by divine fiat, by evolution, by intelligent design, or by some other means that we do not yet understand. Ancient peoples also struggled to understand how the world came into being. They expressed their questions and theories in stories, rather than in the scientific theories we

propose today. This difference is an important one to note when we read the Old Testament. Ancient peoples used stories to express their beliefs and values. These stories were not primarily concerned with relating the facts of a given situation; rather, they expressed the contemporary meaning their tellers found in ancient events and circumstances.

The first two chapters of Genesis tell two stories of how the world came into being. The two stories have several common elements: one Creator made the universe by shaping and organizing everything within the confines of time and space to make sure that every creature belonged in it and nothing was destroyed. Among all the creatures, humans were given a special place.

Each of the two stories has distinctive features as well. These give each story its unique character.

**1:1–2:3 First creation story**

Genesis 1:1–2:4a describes a seven-day process during which the Creator’s word, “Let there be . . .” brings the different elements of the universe into being. The first three days witness the creation of the environment, and the second three days parallel the first, with the creation of creatures to live in the different spaces in the environment. We can chart this parallel in the following way:

Days 1-3	Days 4-6
Light, Day and Night	Greater Light, Lesser Light, Stars
Water and Sky	Fish and Birds
Land and Sea, Plants	Earth Creatures, Animal and Human

Creation begins with a powerful wind sweeping over the waters. Then the activity of each day begins with the formula, “God said: Let there be . . .” Then the narrative reports the specific activity for the day. At the end of the first, third, fourth, and sixth days, God saw that it was “good.” On the sixth day, after all the creatures had been created, God looked over all of creation and saw that it was “very good” (1:31). The description of each day’s work ends with the notation, “Evening came, and morning followed . . .,” then gives the number of the day. The account illustrates the power ancient people associated with the spoken word: to speak was to set an action in motion; thus speech had a sacramental quality insofar as it caused what it signified. The formulas suggest the unfolding of a ritual: creation occurs according to an organized plan by which God first creates the environment, then populates it with creatures suitable for that particular part of the universe.

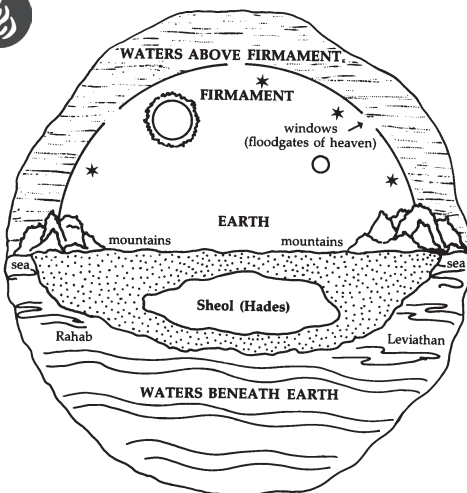


Illustration of ancient cosmology

called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” Evening came, and morning followed—the first day.

<sup>6</sup>Then God said: Let there be a dome in the middle of the waters, to separate one body of water from the other. <sup>7</sup>God made the dome, and it separated the water below the dome from the water above the dome. And so it happened. <sup>8</sup>God called the dome “sky.” Evening came, and morning followed—the second day.

<sup>9</sup>Then God said: Let the water under the sky be gathered into a single basin, so that the dry land may appear. And so it happened: the water under the sky was gathered into its basin, and the dry land appeared. <sup>10</sup>God called the dry land “earth,” and the basin of water he called “sea.” God saw that it was good. <sup>11</sup>Then God said: Let the earth bring forth vegetation: every kind of plant that bears seed and every kind of fruit tree on earth that bears fruit with its seed in it. And so it happened: <sup>12</sup>the earth brought forth vegetation: every kind of plant that bears seed and every kind of fruit tree that bears fruit with its seed in it. God saw that it was good. <sup>13</sup>Evening came, and morning followed—the third day.

<sup>14</sup>Then God said: Let there be lights in the dome of the sky, to separate day from night. Let

*continue*

In verse 6 the dome, or firmament, represents the ancient Near Eastern concept of a divider between the heavens and the earth. We can picture it as a large bowl inverted and set on a flat surface. Everything under the bowl is inside the firmament, and the rest is outside it.

One of the first acts of creation is to harness the waters by assigning them to specific places in the cosmos. This attention to water highlights its necessity for life, and the need to protect and preserve it in the arid ancient Near Eastern climate.

The separation of light from darkness in 1:14 makes it possible to count the passage of time, not only according to days but also to

them mark the seasons, the days and the years,<sup>15</sup> and serve as lights in the dome of the sky, to illuminate the earth. And so it happened: <sup>16</sup>God made the two great lights, the greater one to govern the day, and the lesser one to govern the night, and the stars. <sup>17</sup>God set them in the dome of the sky, to illuminate the earth, <sup>18</sup>to govern the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. God saw that it was good. <sup>19</sup>Evening came, and morning followed—the fourth day.

<sup>20</sup>Then God said: Let the water teem with an abundance of living creatures, and on the earth let birds fly beneath the dome of the sky. <sup>21</sup>God created the great sea monsters and all kinds of crawling living creatures with which the water teems, and all kinds of winged birds. God saw that it was good, <sup>22</sup>and God blessed them, saying: Be fertile, multiply, and fill the water of the seas; and let the birds multiply on the earth. <sup>23</sup>Evening came, and morning followed—the fifth day.

<sup>24</sup>Then God said: Let the earth bring forth every kind of living creature: tame animals, crawling things, and every kind of wild animal. And so it happened: <sup>25</sup>God made every kind of wild animal, every kind of tame animal, and every kind of thing that crawls on the ground. God saw that it was good. <sup>26</sup>Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the tame animals, all the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth.

<sup>27</sup>God created mankind in his image;  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

<sup>28</sup>God blessed them and God said to them: Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that crawl on the earth. <sup>29</sup>God also said: See, I give you every seed-bearing plant on all the earth and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit on it to be your food; <sup>30</sup>and to all the wild animals, all the birds of the air, and all the living creatures that crawl on the

*continue*

seasons and years. God blesses the creatures of the sea, air, and earth (v. 22), commanding them to be fertile and multiply, assuring the continuity of creation.

The Creator gives a special place to humanity in 1:26. Humans, male and female, are made in the image of God. This is a puzzling statement, for which several explanations have been suggested. For example, we were made with the ability to make decisions, just as God does; or we are the visible “image” of the invisible God in the world. As God’s human counterpart, we have the ability to communicate with God and to ask “Why?” when we do not understand. We also have dominion over all the other creatures. This awesome responsibility involves nurturing and protecting all the other creatures in the universe. The biblical story contrasts with the Mesopotamian *Enuma Elish*, which is full of violence and oppression. In that version the gods compete for the opportunity to create the universe. The victor, Marduk, creates humans to serve the gods.

The seventh day is designated as holy because it is God’s day of rest (2:3). In the ancient world “holy” meant “set aside for God.” Legislation concerning sabbath observance relied on this model of divine rest. It gives us an example for how to spend the day of the week that is set aside for God.

This first creation account is the work of the P editor. At the time of its compilation the people of Jerusalem were in exile in Babylon as a result of the Babylonian takeover of the ancient Near East. They were searching for the meaning of their exile, and for evidence that God still cared for them and maintained the universe. The insertion of the account, one of the last to be composed, at the beginning of the entire Bible introduces the themes of one God, divine concern for creatures, the dignity of human beings, and the orderly division of creation into different habitats for different creatures, different times for different activities, and the importance of honoring God in difficult times as well as moments of celebration.

## 2:4-25 Second creation story

Immediately after the first story of creation, a second one follows. Like the first, it highlights the special place of humans in creation, relating it in a storytelling mode. We can picture the divine creative actions: shaping things out of clay, planting a garden, instructing the human on how to act in the garden. The breath of God suggests the same kind of energy found in the first creation story: the blowing wind is an invisible force that causes things to happen. God's first act of creation in this account is to shape a human being from the dust of the earth. Again we notice the importance of water: a stream waters all the ground, making it possible to work the soil, and becomes four rivers. Two of these rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, run through Turkey, Syria, and Iraq.

The prohibition in verse 17 not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil carries with it the threat of death. Death is not explained here; its meaning is already known by the time the story is set in writing, probably around 1000 B.C. The mention of it foreshadows the snake's temptation of the humans in the next chapter, where punishment by death is best explained as an etiological detail, which is an explanation of one of life's realities.

This creation story highlights the importance of relationships: God makes all the other creatures in an effort to provide a suitable companion for the human (v. 18). Only another human can offer that companionship, which finds its ultimate expression in marriage. The solemn wording of verse 24, "That is why . . ." identifies this verse as another etiology, or explanation of the reality of marriage.

This second creation story is the work of J, the storyteller who first collated the ancient stories in an effort to establish a common memory for the tribes united under David. It depicts the work of creation by giving concrete details and describing God in immanent terms. In other words, it depicts God with descriptions that enable us to know God's nearness to us. We can contrast this description with that in the first creation story, which depicts God as

earth, I give all the green plants for food. And so it happened. <sup>31</sup>God looked at everything he had made, and found it very good. Evening came, and morning followed—the sixth day.

### I. The Story of the Nations

#### CHAPTER 2

<sup>1</sup>Thus the heavens and the earth and all their array were completed. <sup>2</sup>On the seventh day God completed the work he had been doing; he rested on the seventh day from all the work he had undertaken. <sup>3</sup>God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work he had done in creation.

#### *The Garden of Eden*

<sup>4</sup>This is the story of the heavens and the earth at their creation. When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens— <sup>5</sup>there was no field shrub on earth and no grass of the field had sprouted, for the LORD God had sent no rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the ground, <sup>6</sup>but a stream was welling up out of the earth and watering all the surface of the ground— <sup>7</sup>then the LORD God formed the man out of the dust of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

<sup>8</sup>The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom he had formed. <sup>9</sup>Out of the ground the LORD God made grow every tree that was delightful to look at and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

*continue*

transcendent, or far beyond our ability to comprehend. The juxtaposition of the two stories illustrates the belief that God is both transcendent and immanent: infinitely beyond our ability to grasp and at the same time here in our midst.



<sup>10</sup>A river rises in Eden to water the garden; beyond there it divides and becomes four branches.

<sup>11</sup>The name of the first is the Pishon; it is the one that winds through the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. <sup>12</sup>The gold of that land is good; bdellium and lapis lazuli are also there. <sup>13</sup>The name of the second river is the Gihon; it is the one that winds all through the land of Cush. <sup>14</sup>The name of the third river is the Tigris; it is the one that flows east of Asshur. The fourth river is the Euphrates.

<sup>15</sup>The LORD God then took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it. <sup>16</sup>The LORD God gave the man this order: You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden <sup>17</sup>except the tree of knowledge of good and evil. From that tree you shall not eat; when you eat from it you shall die.

<sup>18</sup>The LORD God said: It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suited to him. <sup>19</sup>So the LORD God formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds of the air, and he brought them to the man to see what he would call them; whatever the man called each living creature was then its name. <sup>20</sup>The man gave names to all the tame animals, all the birds of the air, and all the wild animals; but none proved to be a helper suited to the man.

<sup>21</sup>So the LORD God cast a deep sleep on the man, and while he was asleep, he took out one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. <sup>22</sup>The LORD God then built the rib that he had taken from the man into a woman. When he brought her to the man, <sup>23</sup>the man said:

“This one, at last, is bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
This one shall be called ‘woman,’  
for out of man this one has been taken.”

<sup>24</sup>That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body.

<sup>25</sup>The man and his wife were both naked, yet they felt no shame.

*continue*

After the two creation stories, the Primeval Story describes incidents in which humans begin to violate the boundaries the Creator has established between God and creatures. Each of the stories describes the way the boundary is violated, gives a divine declaration of that violation and the tendency to evil, and reports divine actions to restore the balance in the relationship between God and humans. Interwoven with these are etiological tales about place names, customs, or human realities; for example, marriage, the wearing of clothes, the reality of shame, evil, and death. At different points throughout the stories, genealogies name those who belong to the different tribes and clans and specify the relationships among them. The names are often eponymous: names of individuals become the names of groups such as Israel, the name given to Jacob in 32:29.



The Hebrew verb **kabash (subdue)**

frequently appears in contexts of war (e.g., 2 Sam 8:11; 2 Chron 28:10) or in situations where one person has power over another (e.g., Esth 7:8). Here, human creatures are given power over other created beings, a power that Saint John Paul II interprets as responsibility (see *The Ecological Crisis*, 3). Far from a view that places humans at the center of creation with a right to dominate the rest of creation, the church is moving toward a recognition that all created reality has integrity and intrinsic value as the sphere of God’s action. “Each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God’s infinite wisdom and goodness. Man [and woman] must therefore respect the particular goodness of every creature, to avoid any disordered use of things which would be in contempt of the Creator and would bring disastrous consequences for human beings and their environment” (CCC, 339).

### 3:1-24 Adam, Eve, and the serpent

The creation story in chapter 2 includes the divine prohibition against eating the fruit of a particular tree that God gave to the first human before the creation of the woman. Here a new creature enters the picture, described only as a snake. No physical description is given until the creature receives the divine punishment for leading the humans into sin (vv. 14-15). At that point the creature loses its legs and is condemned to crawl on the ground, eat dirt, and reach up only to the heels of humans. The creature is a tempter, but is not the devil in the modern sense of that term.

The snake approaches the woman while the man is with her (v. 6), misquoting the divine prohibition by applying it to all the fruit trees (v. 4). She in turn adds to the original prohibition the command not even to touch the forbidden fruit under pain of death (v. 3). The snake's words immediately characterize him as cunning, and the woman's words portray her as eager to observe the divine prohibition. The snake capitalizes on the reason for avoiding the fruit: death will follow. Even though death has not been explained, the story makes clear that the Creator, the snake, and the woman all see it as something to avoid. Here the story resembles other ancient Near Eastern myths that describe the futile efforts of creatures to become immortal. The snake then insinuates that the divine prohibition has a different motive: eating the fruit gives to humans divine knowledge of good and evil; eating the fruit will make the humans like gods.

This is a complex idea: God made the humans in the divine image; the temptation is to eat in order to become more like God by knowing as much as God, ironically, about good and evil. The fruit promises to have more benefits than the snake first mentions: it tastes good, is beautiful, and gives wisdom. The woman eats some, then gives some to the man who does the same. As soon as they have eaten, the snake's promise proves true: they have increased knowledge that shows itself in their awareness of their nakedness. Ironically, the couple now know about good and evil through experience: they have taken it into themselves.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Expulsion from Eden*

<sup>1</sup>Now the snake was the most cunning of all the wild animals that the LORD God had made. He asked the woman, "Did God really say, 'You shall not eat from any of the trees in the garden?'"

<sup>2</sup>The woman answered the snake: "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; <sup>3</sup>it is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, 'You shall not eat it or even touch it, or else you will die.'" <sup>4</sup>But the snake said to the woman: "You certainly will not die! <sup>5</sup>God knows well that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, who know good and evil." <sup>6</sup>The woman saw that the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eyes, and the tree was desirable for gaining wisdom. So she took some of its fruit and ate it; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. <sup>7</sup>Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

<sup>8</sup>When they heard the sound of the LORD God walking about in the garden at the breezy time of the day, the man and his wife hid themselves from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. <sup>9</sup>The LORD God then called to the man and asked him: Where are you? <sup>10</sup>He answered, "I heard you in the garden; but I was afraid, because I was naked, so I hid." <sup>11</sup>Then God asked: Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat? <sup>12</sup>The man replied, "The woman whom you put here with me—she gave me fruit from the tree, so I ate it." <sup>13</sup>The LORD God then asked the woman: What is this you have done? The woman answered, "The snake tricked me, so I ate it."

<sup>14</sup>Then the LORD God said to the snake:

Because you have done this,  
cursed are you  
among all the animals, tame or wild;

*continue*



On your belly you shall crawl,  
and dust you shall eat  
all the days of your life.

<sup>15</sup>I will put enmity between you and the  
woman,  
and between your offspring and hers;  
They will strike at your head,  
while you strike at their heel.

<sup>16</sup>To the woman he said:  
I will intensify your toil in childbearing;  
in pain you shall bring forth children.  
Yet your urge shall be for your husband,  
and he shall rule over you.

<sup>17</sup>To the man he said: Because you listened to  
your wife and ate from the tree about which I  
commanded you, You shall not eat from it,

Cursed is the ground because of you!  
In toil you shall eat its yield  
all the days of your life.

<sup>18</sup>Thorns and thistles it shall bear for you,  
and you shall eat the grass of the field.

<sup>19</sup>By the sweat of your brow  
you shall eat bread,  
Until you return to the ground,  
from which you were taken;  
For you are dust,  
and to dust you shall return.

<sup>20</sup>The man gave his wife the name "Eve," because she was the mother of all the living.

<sup>21</sup>The LORD God made for the man and his wife garments of skin, with which he clothed them. <sup>22</sup>Then the LORD God said: See! The man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil! Now, what if he also reaches out his hand to take fruit from the tree of life, and eats of it and lives forever? <sup>23</sup>The LORD God therefore banished him from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he had been taken. <sup>24</sup>He expelled the man, stationing the cherubim and the fiery revolving sword east of the garden of Eden, to guard the way to the tree of life.

The divine question in verse 9, "Where are you?" underscores the tragic rupture of the divine-human relationship caused by human efforts to usurp divine power. The sin is thus in crossing the boundary that God set for them. They attempt to go beyond the limits of humanity and usurp power that belongs only to God.

The Lord God punishes all three: snake, woman, and man. Of the three, the words to the woman are the fewest, and she is not accused of committing the first sin. That idea does not appear in the Bible until Sirach 25:24: "With a woman sin had a beginning, / and because of her we all die." The punishments are etiologies that explain such human questions as "Why are women and men attracted to each other?" "Why do some people try to dominate others?" "Why do we wear clothes?" "Why is childbirth painful?" "Why is work difficult?" "Why do snakes crawl on the ground?" "Why do we die?" Finally, the divine words recall the second creation story, in which God fashioned the human being from the ground, and reminds Adam that he will return to the earth from which he came. Immediately after hearing this, the man names his wife Eve. Naming her is an act of domination, and at the same time the name he gives her acknowledges the mutuality between man and woman, announcing the beginning of motherhood and Eve's role as the first mother, illustrating the complexity of human relationships.

God punishes the couple, but does not abandon them. Immediately after announcing the punishment, God arranges for their needs by providing clothes for them. In covering their nakedness, God removes their shame. This act of compassion establishes a precedent for what follows repeatedly throughout the Old Testament: when humans violate the terms of the divine-human relationship God finds a way to restore the balance by providing for the needs of the people.

**EXPLORING LESSON ONE**

1. What are your hopes and expectations as you begin studying Genesis?

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2. Identify some key events in your life that you would label as “beginnings.”

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3. List the three important themes of Genesis indicated by the commentary Introduction.

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4. What do we mean when we say that ancient writers were more concerned about meaning than details?

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5. How do the fourth, fifth, and sixth days of creation (1:14-31) complement the first, second, and third days of creation (1:3-13)?

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*Lesson One*

6. When are you most keenly aware of the goodness of God's creation (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31)? (See Pss 8:4-10; 19:1-4; 33:6; Jer 32:17; Rom 1:19-20.)

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7. What responsibilities are implied by the gift of our dominion over creation (1:26; 2:15)?

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8. How would you explain the importance of humans being created in the image of God (1:26-27)? (See 9:6; 1 John 4:20.)

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9. What changes in the human condition does Genesis 3:16-19 indicate are a result of the couple's disobedience?

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10. How is God's care and concern for humans shown to continue even after their sin (3:21)?

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## CLOSING PRAYER

### *Prayer*

*God looked at everything he had made, and found it very good. (Gen 1:31)*

In your generosity, O God, you created all that is and looked upon it with love. Instill in us this same loving gaze as we look upon the created world. When we are tempted to take for granted any person or living thing, remind us of the goodness of each thing you created. We pray for those who need to be reminded of their goodness, especially . . .

## LESSON TWO

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### Genesis 4–10

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Begin your personal study and group discussion with a simple and sincere prayer such as:

#### *Prayer*

*O God of creation, be with me in my study and reflection, and continue to create in me a hunger for your voice.*

Read the Bible text of Genesis 4–10 found in the outside columns of pages 28–37, highlighting what stands out to you.

Read the accompanying commentary to add to your understanding.

Respond to the questions on pages 38–39, Exploring Lesson Two.

The Closing Prayer on page 40 is for your personal use and may be used at the end of group discussion.

## CHAPTER 4

### *Cain and Abel*

<sup>1</sup>The man had intercourse with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain, saying, “I have produced a male child with the help of the LORD.” <sup>2</sup>Next she gave birth to his brother Abel. Abel became a herder of flocks, and Cain a tiller of the ground. <sup>3</sup>In the course of time Cain brought an offering to the LORD from the fruit of the ground, <sup>4</sup>while Abel, for his part, brought the fatty portion of the firstlings of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, <sup>5</sup>but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry and dejected. <sup>6</sup>Then the LORD said to Cain: Why are you angry? Why are you dejected? <sup>7</sup>If you act rightly, you will be accepted; but if not, sin lies in wait at the door: its urge is for you, yet you can rule over it.

<sup>8</sup>Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let us go out in the field.” When they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. <sup>9</sup>Then the LORD asked Cain, Where is your brother Abel? He answered, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” <sup>10</sup>God then said: What have you done? Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground! <sup>11</sup>Now you are banned from the ground that opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. <sup>12</sup>If you till the ground, it shall no longer give you its produce. You shall become a constant wanderer on the earth. <sup>13</sup>Cain said to the LORD: “My punishment is too great to bear. <sup>14</sup>Look, you have now banished me from the ground. I must avoid you and be a constant wanderer on the earth. Anyone may kill me at sight.” <sup>15</sup>Not so! the LORD said to him. If anyone kills Cain, Cain shall be avenged seven times. So the LORD put a mark on Cain, so that no one would kill him at sight. <sup>16</sup>Cain then left the LORD’s presence and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

*continue*



### **4:1-16 The first murder**

The story of humanity continues with the births of Cain and Abel to Adam and Eve, as God promised after the first sin. The divine acceptance of Abel’s sacrifice but not Cain’s is troubling, as it appears to show that God plays favorites. We are not told how the brothers know whether their sacrifice is accepted, nor do we know why God rejects Cain’s sacrifice. Perhaps the fact that Abel offers the first of his flock, while Cain offers the first of his crops, attests to the high regard for shepherds in the eleventh century, when the story was most likely put in writing. The main point of the story, though, is in Cain’s reaction to the divine rejection of his offering. The Lord’s speech to him suggests that rejecting Cain’s offering does not in any way mean divine rejection of Cain himself. Cain’s task is to do what is right, rather than give sin a chance to overtake him.

Cain’s response is to kill his brother, violating the divine-human boundary by trying to exercise control over life and death. The divine question that follows in verse 9 reminds us of the question to Adam in 3:9, “Where are you?” Here the Lord asks Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” highlighting the alienation that results from sin (4:9). The divine question holds Cain responsible for his brother Abel’s



welfare. Cain's contemptuous response illustrates his nonconcern for his brother and his disregard for the deity. The Lord's punishment of Cain is an example of *lex talionis*, the law of retaliation that specifies that the punishment must fit the crime in both kind and degree: it must relate to the wrong that has been done, and must equal and not exceed the amount of wrong that was done. Cain will no longer be able to subsist as a farmer because he has violated the very soil that he works. As with Adam and Eve, God punishes Cain, but does not abandon him, instead marking him for special protection.



The story of **Cain** and **Abel** is the first of many stories of biblical brothers. Soon we will meet Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Joseph and his many brothers, and Moses and Aaron, to name but a few. Already exiled from the garden, humans now experience more of the shadow side of human existence. In Cain and Abel we see industry that turns to rivalry, confusion that turns to blame, and anger that turns to violence. Brother kills brother and so it has seemed to go through history. God's people used the story of these first two brothers to reflect on the reality of sin and alienation in the human family, and to reflect on the truth that not all things in life are fair. After all, it is God who chooses one brother's gift over that of the other. This story turns our attention to Cain, the guilty one, the one who accepts exile but fears death. God's mercy is seen as a "mark on Cain"—it is a mark of guilt but just as surely a mark of God's graceful protection. Cain reminds us that we are marked by seeming contradictions also. At the same time, we are sinners who find ourselves consumed by the harm we do, and saints who are loved and protected by God.

### *Descendants of Cain and Seth*

<sup>17</sup>Cain had intercourse with his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. Cain also became the founder of a city, which he named after his son Enoch. <sup>18</sup>To Enoch was born Irad, and Irad became the father of Mehujael; Mehujael became the father of Methusael, and Methusael became the father of Lamech. <sup>19</sup>Lamech took two wives; the name of the first was Adah, and the name of the second Zillah. <sup>20</sup>Adah gave birth to Jabal, who became the ancestor of those who dwell in tents and keep livestock. <sup>21</sup>His brother's name was Jubal, who became the ancestor of all who play the lyre and the reed pipe. <sup>22</sup>Zillah, on her part, gave birth to Tubalcain, the ancestor of all who forge instruments of bronze and iron. The sister of Tubalcain was Naamah. <sup>23</sup>Lamech said to his wives:

“Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;  
wives of Lamech, listen to my utterance:

I have killed a man for wounding me,  
a young man for bruising me.

<sup>24</sup>If Cain is avenged seven times,  
then Lamech seventy-seven times.”

<sup>25</sup>Adam again had intercourse with his wife, and she gave birth to a son whom she called Seth. “God has granted me another offspring in place of Abel,” she said, “because Cain killed him.” <sup>26</sup>To Seth, in turn, a son was born, and he named him Enosh.

At that time people began to invoke the LORD by name.

*continue*

#### **4:17-24 Genealogical note**

The genealogical note that follows in verses 17-24 shows that Cain has several generations of descendants who develop different professions important to civilization.

#### **4:25–5:32 Adam's descendants**

The narrative returns to Adam and Eve, reporting that they have additional children.

## CHAPTER 5

### *Generations: Adam to Noah*

<sup>1</sup>This is the record of the descendants of Adam. When God created human beings, he made them in the likeness of God; <sup>2</sup>he created them male and female. When they were created, he blessed them and named them humankind.

<sup>3</sup>Adam was one hundred and thirty years old when he begot a son in his likeness, after his image; and he named him Seth. <sup>4</sup>Adam lived eight hundred years after he begot Seth, and he had other sons and daughters. <sup>5</sup>The whole lifetime of Adam was nine hundred and thirty years; then he died.

<sup>6</sup>When Seth was one hundred and five years old, he begot Enosh. <sup>7</sup>Seth lived eight hundred and seven years after he begot Enosh, and he had other sons and daughters. <sup>8</sup>The whole lifetime of Seth was nine hundred and twelve years; then he died.

<sup>9</sup>When Enosh was ninety years old, he begot Kenan. <sup>10</sup>Enosh lived eight hundred and fifteen years after he begot Kenan, and he had other sons and daughters. <sup>11</sup>The whole lifetime of Enosh was nine hundred and five years; then he died.

<sup>12</sup>When Kenan was seventy years old, he begot Mahalalel. <sup>13</sup>Kenan lived eight hundred and forty years after he begot Mahalalel, and he had other sons and daughters. <sup>14</sup>The whole lifetime of Kenan was nine hundred and ten years; then he died.

<sup>15</sup>When Mahalalel was sixty-five years old, he begot Jared. <sup>16</sup>Mahalalel lived eight hundred and thirty years after he begot Jared, and he had other sons and daughters. <sup>17</sup>The whole lifetime of Mahalalel was eight hundred and ninety-five years; then he died.

<sup>18</sup>When Jared was one hundred and sixty-two years old, he begot Enoch. <sup>19</sup>Jared lived eight hundred years after he begot Enoch, and he had other sons and daughters. <sup>20</sup>The whole lifetime of Jared was nine hundred and sixty-two years; then he died.

<sup>21</sup>When Enoch was sixty-five years old, he begot Methuselah. <sup>22</sup>Enoch walked with God after he begot Methuselah for three hundred years, and he had other sons and daughters. <sup>23</sup>The

whole lifetime of Enoch was three hundred and sixty-five years. <sup>24</sup>Enoch walked with God, and he was no longer here, for God took him.

<sup>25</sup>When Methuselah was one hundred and eighty-seven years old, he begot Lamech. <sup>26</sup>Methuselah lived seven hundred and eighty-two years after he begot Lamech, and he had other sons and daughters. <sup>27</sup>The whole lifetime of Methuselah was nine hundred and sixty-nine years; then he died.

<sup>28</sup>When Lamech was one hundred and eighty-two years old, he begot a son <sup>29</sup>and named him Noah, saying, "This one shall bring us relief from our work and the toil of our hands, out of the very ground that the LORD has put under a curse." <sup>30</sup>Lamech lived five hundred and ninety-five years after he begot Noah, and he had other sons and daughters. <sup>31</sup>The whole lifetime of Lamech was seven hundred and seventy-seven years; then he died.

<sup>32</sup>When Noah was five hundred years old, he begot Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

## CHAPTER 6

### *Origin of the Nephilim*

<sup>1</sup>When human beings began to grow numerous on the earth and daughters were born to them, <sup>2</sup>the sons of God saw how beautiful the daughters of human beings were, and so they took for their wives whomever they pleased. <sup>3</sup>Then the LORD said: My spirit shall not remain in human beings forever, because they are only flesh. Their days shall comprise one hundred and twenty years.

<sup>4</sup>The Nephilim appeared on earth in those days, as well as later, after the sons of God had intercourse with the daughters of human beings, who bore them sons. They were the heroes of old, the men of renown.

### *Warning of the Flood*

<sup>5</sup>When the LORD saw how great the wickedness of human beings was on earth, and how every desire that their heart conceived was always nothing but evil, <sup>6</sup>the LORD regretted making human beings on the earth, and his heart was grieved.

*continue*

The comment that people then begin to call on the Lord by name is puzzling because it seems to come too early: the Lord reveals the name YHWH to Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:14), long after the time of the first humans. It might reflect the religious practices in the eleventh century, when the passage was most likely set down in written form. It also attests to the beginning of formal acts of worship, associating them with the descendants of Adam from earliest times.

A detailed genealogy records Adam's line to Noah's three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. The narrative points out that the people are made with the same characteristics as the first humans: in God's image, male and female, and blessed. The list in chapter 5 includes many of the same names that we find in 4:17-24, but they are not identical. The lists represent different traditions, both of which were preserved when the stories were written down. The list in chapter 5 involves ten generations from Adam to Noah, a number that is parallel to the number of generations from Noah to Abraham in chapter 10. We cannot know the precise ages of these early people, partly because we do not know how they reckoned time and partly because the ages are unrealistic by modern calculations. Life expectancy today is the longest it has ever been, but does not approach the ages recorded here. The ages highlight the passage of a long time after the creation, during which humans thrived but also sinned. Verse 29 singles out Noah, identifying him as the one who will reverse the curse of the ground that began with Adam in 3:17-19 and continued with Cain in 4:10-12.

### 6:1–9:17 The Flood

A brief incident about the Nephilim seems to draw on an ancient story no longer known to us. It recounts further actions that blur the distinction between humans and God, with the result that God regrets having created human beings. Ancient people thought the heart was the locus of thinking and decision making.

<sup>7</sup>So the LORD said: I will wipe out from the earth the human beings I have created, and not only the human beings, but also the animals and the crawling things and the birds of the air, for I regret that I made them. <sup>8</sup>But Noah found favor with the LORD.

<sup>9</sup>These are the descendants of Noah. Noah was a righteous man and blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God. <sup>10</sup>Noah begot three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

<sup>11</sup>But the earth was corrupt in the view of God and full of lawlessness. <sup>12</sup>When God saw how corrupt the earth had become, since all mortals had corrupted their ways on earth, <sup>13</sup>God said to Noah: I see that the end of all mortals has come, for the earth is full of lawlessness because of them. So I am going to destroy them with the earth.

#### *Preparation for the Flood*

<sup>14</sup>Make yourself an ark of gopherwood, equip the ark with various compartments, and cover it inside and out with pitch. <sup>15</sup>This is how you shall build it: the length of the ark will be three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. <sup>16</sup>Make an opening for daylight and finish the ark a cubit above it. Put the ark's entrance on its side; you will make it with bottom, second and third decks. <sup>17</sup>I, on my part, am about to bring the flood waters on the earth, to destroy all creatures under the sky in which there is the breath of life; everything on earth shall perish. <sup>18</sup>I will establish my covenant with you. You shall go into the ark, you and your sons, your wife and your sons' wives with you. <sup>19</sup>Of all living creatures you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, one male and one female, to keep them alive along with you. <sup>20</sup>Of every kind of bird, of every kind of animal, and of every kind of thing that crawls on the ground, two of each will come to you, that you may keep them alive. <sup>21</sup>Moreover, you are to provide yourself with all the food that is to be eaten, and store it away, that it may serve as provisions for you and for them. <sup>22</sup>Noah complied; he did just as God had commanded him.

*continue*

## CHAPTER 7

<sup>1</sup>Then the LORD said to Noah: Go into the ark, you and all your household, for you alone in this generation have I found to be righteous before me. <sup>2</sup>Of every clean animal, take with you seven pairs, a male and its mate; and of the unclean animals, one pair, a male and its mate; <sup>3</sup>likewise, of every bird of the air, seven pairs, a male and a female, to keep their progeny alive over all the earth. <sup>4</sup>For seven days from now I will bring rain down on the earth for forty days and forty nights, and so I will wipe out from the face of the earth every being that I have made. <sup>5</sup>Noah complied, just as the LORD had commanded.

### *The Great Flood*

<sup>6</sup>Noah was six hundred years old when the flood came upon the earth. <sup>7</sup>Together with his sons, his wife, and his sons' wives, Noah went into the ark because of the waters of the flood. <sup>8</sup>Of the clean animals and the unclean, of the birds, and of everything that crawls on the ground, <sup>9</sup>two by two, male and female came to Noah into the ark, just as God had commanded him. <sup>10</sup>When the seven days were over, the waters of the flood came upon the earth.

<sup>11</sup>In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month: on that day

All the fountains of the great abyss burst forth,  
and the floodgates of the sky were opened.

<sup>12</sup>For forty days and forty nights heavy rain poured down on the earth.

<sup>13</sup>On the very same day, Noah and his sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and Noah's wife, and the three wives of Noah's sons had entered the ark, <sup>14</sup>together with every kind of wild animal, every kind of tame animal, every kind of crawling thing that crawls on the earth, and every kind of bird. <sup>15</sup>Pairs of all creatures in which there was the breath of life came to Noah into the ark. <sup>16</sup>Those

that entered were male and female; of all creatures they came, as God had commanded Noah. Then the LORD shut him in.

<sup>17</sup>The flood continued upon the earth for forty days. As the waters increased, they lifted the ark, so that it rose above the earth. <sup>18</sup>The waters swelled and increased greatly on the earth, but the ark floated on the surface of the waters. <sup>19</sup>Higher and higher on the earth the waters swelled, until all the highest mountains under the heavens were submerged. <sup>20</sup>The waters swelled fifteen cubits higher than the submerged mountains. <sup>21</sup>All creatures that moved on earth perished: birds, tame animals, wild animals, and all that teemed on the earth, as well as all humankind. <sup>22</sup>Everything on dry land with the breath of life in its nostrils died. <sup>23</sup>The LORD wiped out every being on earth: human beings and animals, the crawling things and the birds of the air; all were wiped out from the earth. Only Noah and those with him in the ark were left.

<sup>24</sup>And when the waters had swelled on the earth for one hundred and fifty days,

## CHAPTER 8

<sup>1</sup>God remembered Noah and all the animals, wild and tame, that were with him in the ark. So God made a wind sweep over the earth, and the waters began to subside. <sup>2</sup>The fountains of the abyss and the floodgates of the sky were closed, and the downpour from the sky was held back. <sup>3</sup>Gradually the waters receded from the earth. At the end of one hundred and fifty days, the waters had so diminished <sup>4</sup>that, in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. <sup>5</sup>The waters continued to diminish until the tenth month, and on the first day of the tenth month the tops of the mountains appeared.

<sup>6</sup>At the end of forty days Noah opened the hatch of the ark that he had made, <sup>7</sup>and he released a raven. It flew back and forth until the waters dried off from the earth. <sup>8</sup>Then he released a dove, to see if the waters had lessened on the

*continue*



The statement that God's heart is grieved announces God's realization that something is out of place among human beings, and the consequent decision to destroy all life, with the exception of Noah, who finds favor with God (see 5:29). This note introduces the story of the Flood and its aftermath, when creation is destroyed and then re-created.

The earth returns to its primeval chaos when the waters cover the earth, bursting forth from the boundaries to which they were assigned at the creation. And just as a divine wind swept over the waters in the beginning, so the same divine act returns the waters to their boundaries after the Flood. (In contrast, in the Epic of Gilgamesh the gods are terrified, once they see the destructive flood they have caused, and which they are powerless to control.) Once the people are back on dry land, Noah's sacrifice convinces God never to flood the earth again. God re-creates the people, providing for their needs in the same way as at the creation, with one exception: permission is granted to eat meat as long as the lifeblood has first been drained out. The reason for this stipulation is that blood is the symbol of life, and therefore belongs only to God. The rainbow sign of covenant flashes back to the seventh day after the six days of creation, the day set aside for honoring the Creator. Now God makes the rainbow the solemn sign of the promise never to destroy the earth in this way again. Thus the Flood story ends with the re-establishment of the relationship between God and all creatures.

The repetition of the names of Noah's sons in 6:9-10 (see 5:32) is the first indication that the narrative includes different versions. These two versions are not separate accounts, as we have in the two creation stories; rather, the two are woven together throughout the story, giving different sets of details that express the two different points of view while telling a single story.

earth. <sup>9</sup>But the dove could find no place to perch, and it returned to him in the ark, for there was water over all the earth. Putting out his hand, he caught the dove and drew it back to him inside the ark. <sup>10</sup>He waited yet seven days more and again released the dove from the ark. <sup>11</sup>In the evening the dove came back to him, and there in its bill was a plucked-off olive leaf! So Noah knew that the waters had diminished on the earth. <sup>12</sup>He waited yet another seven days and then released the dove; but this time it did not come back.

<sup>13</sup>In the six hundred and first year, in the first month, on the first day of the month, the water began to dry up on the earth. Noah then removed the covering of the ark and saw that the surface of the ground had dried. <sup>14</sup>In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry.

<sup>15</sup>Then God said to Noah: <sup>16</sup>Go out of the ark, together with your wife and your sons and your sons' wives. <sup>17</sup>Bring out with you every living thing that is with you—all creatures, be they birds or animals or crawling things that crawl on the earth—and let them abound on the earth, and be fertile and multiply on it. <sup>18</sup>So Noah came out, together with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives; <sup>19</sup>and all the animals, all the birds, and all the crawling creatures that crawl on the earth went out of the ark by families.

<sup>20</sup>Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and choosing from every clean animal and every clean bird, he offered burnt offerings on the altar. <sup>21</sup>When the LORD smelled the sweet odor, the LORD said to himself: Never again will I curse the ground because of human beings, since the desires of the human heart are evil from youth; nor will I ever again strike down every living being, as I have done.

<sup>22</sup>All the days of the earth,  
seedtime and harvest,  
cold and heat,  
Summer and winter,  
and day and night  
shall not cease.

*continue*



## CHAPTER 9

### *Covenant with Noah*

<sup>1</sup>God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them: Be fertile and multiply and fill the earth. <sup>2</sup>Fear and dread of you shall come upon all the animals of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon all the creatures that move about on the ground and all the fishes of the sea; into your power they are delivered. <sup>3</sup>Any living creature that moves about shall be yours to eat; I give them all to you as I did the green plants. <sup>4</sup>Only meat with its lifeblood still in it you shall not eat. <sup>5</sup>Indeed for your own lifeblood I will demand an accounting: from every animal I will demand it, and from a human being, each one for the blood of another, I will demand an accounting for human life.

<sup>6</sup>Anyone who sheds the blood of a human being,  
by a human being shall that one's blood  
be shed;  
For in the image of God  
have human beings been made.

<sup>7</sup>Be fertile, then, and multiply; abound on earth and subdue it.

<sup>8</sup>God said to Noah and to his sons with him: <sup>9</sup>See, I am now establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you <sup>10</sup>and with every living creature that was with you: the birds, the tame animals, and all the wild animals that were with you—all that came out of the ark. <sup>11</sup>I will establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood; there shall not be another flood to devastate the earth. <sup>12</sup>God said: This is the sign of the covenant that I am making between me and you and every living creature with you for all ages to come: <sup>13</sup>I set my bow in the clouds to serve as a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. <sup>14</sup>When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds, <sup>15</sup>I will remember my covenant between me and you and every living creature—every mortal

*continue*

Other signs of two versions are that humanity is corrupt, and that the Creator decides to destroy it according to J in 6:5-7, and according to P in verses 11-13. God instructs Noah to build an ark in preparation for a devastating flood in verses 14-22. The details suggest the P strand of the story: specific measurements and precise instructions. This ark, or box, will have no steering mechanism; God will be its pilot. The J strand does not include instructions for building, but gives instructions for entering it (7:1-3). The J instructions for entering the ark call for seven pairs of clean and one pair of unclean animals, all of which enter two by two (7:1-5, 8-9), while P reports that one pair of each enters the ark in 7:13-16a. The death of all other creatures appears in 7:21 (P version) and 7:22-23 in the J strand. The report of the end of the flood comes in 8:2b-3a (J) and 8:3b-5 (P). The J strand includes sending out birds to check the progress of the receding waters (8:6-12). Finally, the divine promise never again to destroy the earth by flood appears in 8:21b-22 (J) and 9:11-17 (P).

The P strand relates that God establishes a covenant, or solemn agreement, with Noah and all creatures, never again to destroy the earth by flood. The sign of the covenant will be the rainbow: whenever it appears, God will remember the solemn promise made to Noah. The narrative repeats the word "covenant" seven times, highlighting its solemn significance for God and all creation.

Several narrative elements in the Flood story parallel the first Creation story, illustrating God's creation and re-creation of the world. The chart below shows the similarities between the two stories according to P.

<i>Narrative elements</i>	<i>Creation in 1:1–2:3</i>	<i>Re-creation in 7:11–9:17</i>
Wind over waters/earth	1:2	8:1
Watery chaos	1:1-2	7:11-12, 17-20
Separation of water and dry land	1:9-10	8:3b-5, 13a
Birds and animals brought forth	1:20-21	8:17-19
Blessing on animals: “Be fertile”	1:22	8:17
Humankind made “in the image of God”	1:26-27	9:6
Humans brought forth, blessed: “Be fertile”	1:27-28	9:1, 7
Humankind given dominion over animals	1:28	9:2
Provision of food for humankind	1:29-30	9:3
God saw . . . it was “very good/corrupt”	1:31	6:12
Covenant signs of Sabbath and rainbow	2:2-3	9:9-17



Many passages in the Pentateuch seem to be primarily from only one of the **literary sources**, but in some passages, such as the flood story, the sources have been blended together into a single account (references are to Genesis).

	<b>Yahwist (J)</b>	<b>Priestly (P)</b>
Reason for the flood	Human wickedness (6:5-6)	Human corruption and lawlessness (6:11-12)
God’s response	Regret and decision to wipe out everything (6:6-7)	Decision to destroy (6:12-13)
Number of animals in the ark	Seven pairs of clean animals; one pair of unclean animals (7:1-4)	One pair of every animal (6:19-20)
Duration of flood	Forty days and nights (7:4, 12, 17; 8:6)	360 days = one year (7:24–8:4; cf. 7:11 and 8:13-14)
Reconciliation with God	Noah offers sacrifice (8:20-22)	God makes covenant with Noah (9:1-17)

being—so that the waters will never again become a flood to destroy every mortal being. <sup>16</sup>When the bow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature—every mortal being that is on earth. <sup>17</sup>God told Noah: This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and every mortal being that is on earth.

### *Noah and His Sons*

<sup>18</sup>The sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, Ham and Japheth. Ham was the father of Canaan. <sup>19</sup>These three were the sons of Noah, and from them the whole earth was populated.

<sup>20</sup>Noah, a man of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. <sup>21</sup>He drank some of the wine, became drunk, and lay naked inside his tent. <sup>22</sup>Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness, and he told his two brothers outside. <sup>23</sup>Shem and Japheth, however, took a robe, and holding it on their shoulders, they walked backward and covered their father's nakedness; since their faces were turned the other way, they did not see their father's nakedness. <sup>24</sup>When Noah woke up from his wine and learned what his youngest son had done to him, <sup>25</sup>he said:

“Cursed be Canaan!  
The lowest of slaves  
shall he be to his brothers.”

<sup>26</sup>He also said:

“Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem!  
Let Canaan be his slave.  
<sup>27</sup>May God expand Japheth,  
and may he dwell among the tents of  
Shem;  
and let Canaan be his slave.”

<sup>28</sup>Noah lived three hundred and fifty years after the flood. <sup>29</sup>The whole lifetime of Noah was nine hundred and fifty years; then he died.

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### **9:18-29 Noah and his sons**

A brief genealogical note introduces the vague and puzzling incident between Noah and his son Ham. The story most likely alludes to an ancient Near Eastern story no longer available to us. From an etiological point of view it introduces viniculture and its positive and negative consequences, and also explains the negative attitude of ancient Israel toward the Canaanites: while it was Ham who violated his father, the narrative condemns his son Canaan for Ham's act.

### **10:1-32 Table of nations**

A genealogy of Noah's sons and their descendants illustrates the widespread populating of the earth after the Flood. The genealogy is primarily the work of P, with narrative parts in verses 8-19 and 24-30 ascribed to J. The list, typical of Genesis, does not differentiate between people and nations, but names seventy descendants of Noah through his three sons. Japheth's descendants settle in the area north and west of the Fertile Crescent; Ham's around the Red Sea, northeastern Africa, and Canaan; and Shem's in the Fertile Crescent and Arabian Peninsula. This list of ten generations from Noah to Abraham parallels the ten generations from Adam to Noah in chapter 5. It does not prioritize any of the peoples, but names all of them as beneficiaries of the covenant God makes with Noah after the Flood.

## CHAPTER 10

### *Table of the Nations*

<sup>1</sup>These are the descendants of Noah's sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, to whom children were born after the flood.

<sup>2</sup>The descendants of Japheth: Gomer, Magog, Madai, Javan, Tubal, Meshech and Tiras. <sup>3</sup>The descendants of Gomer: Ashkenaz, Diphath and Togarmah. <sup>4</sup>The descendants of Javan: Elishah, Tarshish, the Kittim and the Rodanim. <sup>5</sup>From these branched out the maritime nations.

These are the descendants of Japheth by their lands, each with its own language, according to their clans, by their nations.

<sup>6</sup>The descendants of Ham: Cush, Mizraim, Put and Canaan. <sup>7</sup>The descendants of Cush: Seba, Havilah, Sabtah, Raamah and Sabteca. The descendants of Raamah: Sheba and Dedan.

<sup>8</sup>Cush became the father of Nimrod, who was the first to become a mighty warrior on earth. <sup>9</sup>He was a mighty hunter in the eyes of the LORD; hence the saying, "Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter in the eyes of the LORD." <sup>10</sup>His kingdom originated in Babylon, Erech and Accad, all of them in the land of Shinar. <sup>11</sup>From that land he went forth to Assyria, where he built Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir and Calah, <sup>12</sup>as well as Resen, between Nineveh and Calah, the latter being the principal city.

<sup>13</sup>Mizraim became the father of the Ludim, the Anamim, the Lehabim, the Naphtuhim, <sup>14</sup>the Pathrusim, the Casluhim, and the Caphtorim from whom the Philistines came.

<sup>15</sup>Canaan became the father of Sidon, his first-born, and of Heth; <sup>16</sup>also of the Jebusites, the Amorites, the Girgashites, <sup>17</sup>the Hivites, the Arkites, the Sinites, <sup>18</sup>the Arvadites, the Zemarites, and the Hamathites. Afterward, the clans of the Canaanites spread out, <sup>19</sup>so that the Canaanite borders extended from Sidon all the way to Gerar, near Gaza, and all the way to Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, near Lasha.

<sup>20</sup>These are the descendants of Ham, according to their clans, according to their languages, by their lands, by their nations.

<sup>21</sup>To Shem also, Japheth's oldest brother and the ancestor of all the children of Eber, children were born. <sup>22</sup>The descendants of Shem: Elam, Asshur, Arpachshad, Lud and Aram. <sup>23</sup>The descendants of Aram: Uz, Hul, Gether and Mash.

<sup>24</sup>Arpachshad became the father of Shelah, and Shelah became the father of Eber. <sup>25</sup>To Eber two sons were born: the name of the first was Peleg, for in his time the world was divided; and the name of his brother was Joktan.

<sup>26</sup>Joktan became the father of Almodad, Sheleph, Hazarmaveth, Jerah, <sup>27</sup>Hadoram, Uzal, Diklah, <sup>28</sup>Obal, Abimael, Sheba, <sup>29</sup>Ophir, Havilah and Jobab. All these were descendants of Joktan. <sup>30</sup>Their settlements extended all the way from Mesha to Sephar, the eastern hill country.

<sup>31</sup>These are the descendants of Shem, according to their clans, according to their languages, by their lands, by their nations.

<sup>32</sup>These are the clans of Noah's sons, according to their origins and by their nations. From these the nations of the earth branched out after the flood.

**EXPLORING LESSON TWO**

1. Some see Abel’s offering of “the fatty portions” as a superior offering (4:4). Others suggest that at the root of the story is the unfairness of life, demonstrated in God’s preference for Abel’s offering over Cain’s (4:5). What is your opinion?

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2. What is significant about the skills attributed to Cain’s descendants (4:17-22)?

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3. a) How far back are you able to trace your own family tree?

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b) Who is someone of special interest to you in your family’s genealogy?

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4. What are two significant differences in detail found in the Genesis account of the flood that have led scholars to conclude that it is the blending of two different accounts of the flood? (Compare the two accounts using the chart on page 35 as a guide.)

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5. Why is Genesis 8:1 considered the theological heart of the Noah story? (See 30:22; 1 Sam 1:19; Ps 136:23; Luke 1:54.)

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6. Compare what God thinks of humanity before the flood and after the flood (6:5-7; 8:21). What has changed?

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7. How was the known world of the time of Genesis said to be divided among the descendants of Noah's children (ch. 10)?

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8. a) What do you consider to be the most important message to be found in Genesis 4-10?

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b) What seems to be the most strange or difficult story to understand in Genesis 4-10?

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## CLOSING PRAYER

### *Prayer*

*God remembered Noah and all the animals,  
wild and tame, that were with him in the ark.*

(Gen 8:1)

God of creation, we know you never forget what and whom you have created. When we call on you to remember, we are asking you to make yourself known through your care. On this day we ask for your caring intervention in the lives of those in trouble, especially

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## LESSON THREE

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### Genesis 11–15

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Begin your personal study and group discussion with a simple and sincere prayer such as:

#### *Prayer*

*O God of creation, be with me in my study and reflection, and continue to create in me a hunger for your voice.*

Read the Bible text of Genesis 11–15 found in the outside columns of pages 42–51, highlighting what stands out to you.

Read the accompanying commentary to add to your understanding.

Respond to the questions on pages 52–53, Exploring Lesson Three.

The Closing Prayer on page 54 is for your personal use and may be used at the end of group discussion.

## CHAPTER 11

### *Tower of Babel*

<sup>1</sup>The whole world had the same language and the same words. <sup>2</sup>When they were migrating from the east, they came to a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. <sup>3</sup>They said to one another, “Come, let us mold bricks and harden them with fire.” They used bricks for stone, and bitumen for mortar. <sup>4</sup>Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky, and so make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered all over the earth.”

<sup>5</sup>The LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the people had built. <sup>6</sup>Then the LORD said: If now, while they are one people and all have the same language, they have started to do this, nothing they presume to do will be out of their reach. <sup>7</sup>Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that no one will understand the speech of another. <sup>8</sup>So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. <sup>9</sup>That is why it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the speech of all the world. From there the LORD scattered them over all the earth.

#### *Descendants from Shem to Abraham*

<sup>10</sup>These are the descendants of Shem. When Shem was one hundred years old, he begot Arpachshad, two years after the flood. <sup>11</sup>Shem lived five hundred years after he begot Arpachshad, and he had other sons and daughters. <sup>12</sup>When Arpachshad was thirty-five years old, he begot Shelah. <sup>13</sup>Arpachshad lived four hundred and three years after he begot Shelah, and he had other sons and daughters.

<sup>14</sup>When Shelah was thirty years old, he begot Eber. <sup>15</sup>Shelah lived four hundred and three years after he begot Eber, and he had other sons and daughters.

<sup>16</sup>When Eber was thirty-four years old, he begot Peleg. <sup>17</sup>Eber lived four hundred and thirty years after he begot Peleg, and he had other sons and daughters.

*continue*



#### **11:1-9 The tower of Babel**

The episode brings together three motifs: the development of technology, the dispersion of humanity throughout the world, and the confusion of languages. It specifies that all the people just named in the genealogy speak the same language, highlighting the unity of all humanity under God. In verses 1-4 we learn of a plan and its implementation by the humans, and in verses 5-8 we see the Lord’s plan and its implementation. The people use their technical skills to try to construct a substantial, very tall building that will reach up into the sky, threatening to blur the boundary between the heavenly domain of God and the earthly dwelling of creatures. The Lord sees what the people are building, and realizes the potential threat to the divine-human boundary. Rather than risk a recurrence of chaos the Lord confuses their language and disperses the people all over the earth, thus populating the entire world and removing the danger that chaos will return. In an etiological note, the narrative specifies the name given to the place: Babel or Babylon. The words are similar to our modern term “babble,” or incomprehensible talk, characterizing Babylon as a technologically advanced place where confusion thrives.

### 11:10-28 Shem's descendants

The narrative returns to the genealogy of Shem from 10:22-31, repeating the names of his descendants and adding information about the ages of the different people. The names are the same through Shem's great-grandson Eber, who has two sons: Peleg and Joktan. The list in chapter 10 focuses on Joktan's descendants, while chapter 11 lists those of Peleg. Five generations after Peleg, Abram and his two brothers Nahor and Haran are born. This point marks a transition in the narrative, away from the universal history of the human race to the particular saga of a single family: that of Abram. The genealogies illustrate Abram's ancestral link to the early generations of humankind, and establish a geographical tie to his ancient home in Ur, near the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers (2:14). The stage is now set for the ancestral story.

## THE ANCESTRAL STORY PART 1: ABRAHAM AND SARAH

Genesis 11:29–25:18

With the end of chapter 11 the narrative begins to focus on the family of Terah and four generations of his descendants: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and his two wives Leah and Rachel and their maids Bilhah and Zilpah, and finally Joseph. Chapters 12–36 recount the saga of the first three of these generations, and chapters 37–50 focus on Jacob's son Joseph. The stories, like those in Genesis 1–11, were passed along by oral storytellers over hundreds of years. They were gradually collected and arranged into the narrative we have today. The different episodes in the saga reflect the concerns of the tellers and compilers, who used the stories to address the issues of their day. In this section we will focus on Abraham and Sarah (11:29–25:18).

Chapters 12–36, like Genesis 1–11, are organized around genealogical summaries that mark the generations. In what is called the Abraham cycle, or stories about Abraham, a genealogical statement about Terah appears in 11:27 and of

<sup>18</sup>When Peleg was thirty years old, he begot Reu. <sup>19</sup>Peleg lived two hundred and nine years after he begot Reu, and he had other sons and daughters.

<sup>20</sup>When Reu was thirty-two years old, he begot Serug. <sup>21</sup>Reu lived two hundred and seven years after he begot Serug, and he had other sons and daughters.

<sup>22</sup>When Serug was thirty years old, he begot Nahor. <sup>23</sup>Serug lived two hundred years after he begot Nahor, and he had other sons and daughters.

<sup>24</sup>When Nahor was twenty-nine years old, he begot Terah. <sup>25</sup>Nahor lived one hundred and nineteen years after he begot Terah, and he had other sons and daughters.

<sup>26</sup>When Terah was seventy years old, he begot Abram, Nahor and Haran.

## II. The Story of the Ancestors of Israel

### *Terah*

<sup>27</sup>These are the descendants of Terah. Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran, and Haran begot Lot. <sup>28</sup>Haran died before Terah his father, in his

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Ishmael in 25:12; in the Jacob cycle we find a genealogical summary about Isaac in 25:19; and in the Joseph cycle, a genealogical focus on Jacob appears in 37:2. Throughout these cycles the themes of divine promises of land, descendants, a nation, and blessing form the nucleus of the ancestral stories. Chapters 12–36 are a series of sagas, that is, prose narratives based on oral traditions, with episodic plots around stereotyped themes or topics. The episodes narrate deeds or events from the past as they relate to the world of the narrator. The sagas in these chapters are family sagas, or sagas about the family's past. They incorporate ancient Near Eastern literary conventions such as type scenes and specific family-centered motifs, which we will discuss as we meet them in the sagas.



native land, in Ur of the Chaldeans. <sup>29</sup>Abram and Nahor took wives; the name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah, daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah. <sup>30</sup>Sarai was barren; she had no child.

<sup>31</sup>Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot, son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and brought them out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to go to the land of Canaan. But when they reached Haran, they settled there. <sup>32</sup>The lifetime of Terah was two hundred and five years; then Terah died in Haran.

## CHAPTER 12

### *Abram's Call and Migration*

<sup>1</sup>The LORD said to Abram: Go forth from your land, your relatives, and from your father's house to a land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup>I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the families of the earth will find blessing in you.

<sup>4</sup>Abram went as the LORD directed him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years

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### **11:29–12:9 The call of Abram**

The transitional comments at the end of chapter 11 set the stage for the Abraham cycle by giving biographical information about Abram and Sarai. First, they link Abram with his ancestors. The narrative reports Sarai's childlessness twice, foreshadowing the importance of that detail in the narrative. The couple takes part in the family's migration from their ancient home in Ur to Canaan, but their travels are cut short when they settle in Haran, near the northernmost part of the Fertile Crescent. There Abram hears the divine commission to leave his family and go where the Lord shows him. In 12:2-3 the divine promise to Abraham includes a great nation and blessing; in fact, the word "bless" appears five times here. The

Lord will bless Abram, and in turn he will be a blessing to all the communities on earth.



**Abraham** is considered the original ancestor of the Israelite people. He traveled the whole circuit of the Fertile Crescent, moving with his father from Ur (at the mouth of the Euphrates in modern Iraq) to Haran (near the border of Syria and Turkey), then at God's call into Canaan (modern Israel), and on to Egypt because of famine (11:31–12:10). God's covenant with Abraham (chs. 15; 17) begins to heal the growing alienation described in Genesis 1–11. Abraham is a person of great faith. When God calls him he sets out with his wife Sarah (Sarai) for an unknown land. He believes God's promises of descendants and land in spite of difficulties that seem insurmountable. His faith, however, does not keep him from asking questions (15:2-3, 8; 17:17) or from challenging God (18:22-33). He is perhaps too eager to hurry God when he agrees to attempt to have a son through Sarah's maid Hagar (ch. 16). The greatest test of his faith is God's request that he sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. Abraham immediately prepares to obey, but at the last moment God stops the sacrifice and renews all the promises (ch. 22). Paul proclaims Abraham the father of all people who demonstrate such faith (Rom 4:1-12). The evangelist Matthew places Jesus within the tradition by identifying him as "the son of Abraham" (Matt 1:1-2). In Muslim tradition Abraham is known as "El Khail," the friend of God. (See also 2 Chron 20:7 and James 2:23.)

For a great nation two things are necessary: children and land. The first is a problem because, as the narrative mentions twice, Sarai is childless. In ancient times childlessness was thought to be the woman's problem; that information helps us appreciate the stories from within their cultural point of view, even though

modern medicine has given us a broader understanding of the causes of infertility. We will pick up this motif of childlessness several times in the ancestral story.

The second necessity for a nation, land, is also problematic because Abram and his family are nomads; they have no land of their own. This second problematic motif also appears frequently in the Genesis stories.

Verse 4 does not record any reaction to the divine command on Abram's part; it simply reports that Abram obeys the Lord's directive, taking his family and all his possessions to Canaan. Abram's nephew Lot, whose deceased father Haran was Abram's brother, travels with the family to Shechem. The account gives Abram's age: seventy-five; he is not a young man when they begin this journey.



**Sarah** is the wife of Abraham. She demonstrates courage and faith in agreeing to accompany her husband to unknown destinations and to believe in the promise of a son. She is a beautiful woman and suffers the humiliation of being passed off by her husband as his sister (12:10-20; 20:1-18). She remains childless until she is ninety and then gives birth to her beloved Isaac. Her desire for a child and subsequent devotion to him lead her to cruelty toward her maid Hagar with her son Ishmael (16:5-6; 21:9-10). But Sarah is God's choice for the mother of the promised heir (17:15-21). The people of the covenant are descended from her. Her death is reported immediately after the story of Abraham's interrupted sacrifice of Isaac (23:1-2).

Shechem was already an established worship center by the time Abram and his family arrived there; in verse 6 the narrative refers to a holy place near a certain tree. Abram responds to the divine promise of land by putting his own religious mark on the place: he builds an altar to the Lord. The promise of land is problematic

old when he left Haran. <sup>5</sup>Abram took his wife Sarai, his brother's son Lot, all the possessions that they had accumulated, and the persons they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, <sup>6</sup>Abram passed through the land as far as the sacred place at Shechem, by the oak of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land.

<sup>7</sup>The LORD appeared to Abram and said: To your descendants I will give this land. So Abram built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him. <sup>8</sup>From there he moved on to the hill country east of Bethel, pitching his tent with Bethel to the west and Ai to the east. He built an altar there to the LORD and invoked the LORD by name. <sup>9</sup>Then Abram journeyed on by stages to the Negeb.

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because, as the narrative points out, the Canaanites were already living there. The dilemma of land use and ownership recurs throughout the book of Genesis and the rest of the Old Testament as well. Abram then built a second altar to the Lord near Bethel, south of Shechem, along their route southward toward the Negeb.

In the ancient Near East the building of altars marked sites as places of worship to honor a particular deity. The altars Abram builds identify the sites as places holy for the worship of Abram's God. The building of altars also marks the piece of land as sacred to the builders. Abram, in building an altar, makes an initial claim to the land. The book of Genesis takes for granted the existence of other gods worshiped by other peoples. In contrast, the book of Exodus describes in great detail the cosmic competition between the Lord and Pharaoh, whom the people believed was the personification of the sun god. That contest ends with the Lord's great victory over Pharaoh and the Egyptians, assuring the escaping Israelites that their newly identified Lord can care for them as he promised Moses.

### **Abram and Sarai in Egypt**

<sup>10</sup>There was famine in the land; so Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, since the famine in the land was severe. <sup>11</sup>When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai: "I know that you are a beautiful woman. <sup>12</sup>When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'She is his wife'; then they will kill me, but let you live. <sup>13</sup>Please say, therefore, that you are my sister, so that I may fare well on your account and my life may be spared for your sake." <sup>14</sup>When Abram arrived in Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. <sup>15</sup>When Pharaoh's officials saw her they praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. <sup>16</sup>Abram fared well on her account, and he acquired sheep, oxen, male and female servants, male and female donkeys, and camels.

<sup>17</sup>But the LORD struck Pharaoh and his household with severe plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. <sup>18</sup>Then Pharaoh summoned Abram and said to him: "How could you do this to me! Why did you not tell me she was your wife? <sup>19</sup>Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now, here is your wife. Take her and leave!"

<sup>20</sup>Then Pharaoh gave his men orders concerning Abram, and they sent him away, with his wife and all that belonged to him.

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### **12:10-20 Danger to Sarai**

The family's survival depends on finding adequate sustenance in the face of famine, leading Abram and his family to travel southwest toward Egypt. This episode is told in the form of a type scene, that is, a story that includes several standard plot elements. A couple prepares to enter foreign territory, and the husband fears for his life because his wife is beautiful and the hosts might try to kill him in order to marry his wife. He arranges with his wife that she will pose as his sister, rather than his wife. She does so; the hosts see her, find her attractive, and take her to their leader. Difficulties arise in the leader's house because of the wife-

sister; the leader discovers the truth about the woman; and the couple departs. The scene occurs three times in Genesis; twice with Abram and Sarai and once with Isaac and Rebekah.

The incident that begins in 12:10 includes the above elements. Abram's words to Sarai on the outskirts of Egypt lay out the background information: she will pose as his sister. Sarai makes no reply to his request; we are left wondering whether she agrees or merely acquiesces. No genealogical information is given about Sarai when the family is first introduced in 11:27-30. We assume that she and Abram were related in some way before their marriage because the narrative implies that they both came from the city of Ur. Furthermore, the terms "sister" and "brother" had a broader range of meanings in the ancient world than today; Abram might simply have intended to acknowledge that he and Sarai were relatives.

When they enter Egypt events unfold exactly as Abram predicted, and the Egyptian officials take Sarai to the house of Pharaoh and heap gifts on Abram in return. But the Lord intervenes and brings suffering to Pharaoh's house on account of Abram's deceit. The story does not tell us how Pharaoh learns the cause of his sufferings; it reports only that once Pharaoh realizes what has happened, he orders Abram to leave with his wife and possessions. The type scene includes several noteworthy details. First, Abram seems to be looking out only for himself. He fears for his own life because his wife is beautiful, but does not seem to consider the possible consequences for Sarai, who he anticipates will be the cause of his own danger. A further concern is that Abram jeopardizes the Lord's promise of family because the arrangement threatens to destroy Abram and Sarai's marriage, thus eliminating the possibility that they will have the children God promised them.

The narrative specifies that the punishment to Pharaoh comes from the Lord, assuring that the Lord protects the promise to Abram in the midst of Abram's actions that threaten to negate it. This episode is the first of many that address threats to the divine promises of land

and descendants. The threat sometimes comes through human action, either of Abram or one of his family members, or by someone outside his family. At other times the threat comes from nature and the people's ability to find enough food to eat. In every instance someone does something that jeopardizes the divine promise, and then the Lord takes steps to avert the danger and assure that the promise is carried forward. In this episode Abram himself risks cutting off the possibility of having the children God promised by pretending that he and Sarai are not married. The Lord intervenes when events take their normal course, and assures that the promise will move forward in spite of human interference.

### 13:1-18 Separation of Abram and Lot

Leaving Egypt, Abram and his family retrace their path back toward Bethel and Ai, where he built an altar on his earlier journey through that region. By this time both Abram and Lot have accumulated great wealth in the form of livestock, precious metals, and tents. As the number of animals increases, the need for grazing land to feed them begins to strain the relationship between uncle and nephew. A further complication is that the Canaanites and Perizzites inhabit the land. Abram's solution to the problem is to offer Lot whatever part of the land he wishes, a very magnanimous offer by Abram who, as the older of the two, has the first right of selection. Lot chooses the more fertile area along the Jordan River banks. The narrative foreshadows troubles to come by noting that, even though the area is fertile, its inhabitants are wicked. Lot then moves his flocks to his selected area, and Abram stays in the central region of Canaan.

The episode illustrates Abram's willingness to provide for his nephew, even at significant cost to himself. In verses 14-15 God immediately rewards Abram's generosity by repeating the promise of land and descendants. This time the promises are more expansive than before: Abram is promised land as far as he can see, with descendants too numerous to count. The Lord invites Abram to move about in the land

## CHAPTER 13

### *Abram and Lot Part*

<sup>1</sup>From Egypt Abram went up to the Negeb with his wife and all that belonged to him, and Lot went with him. <sup>2</sup>Now Abram was very rich in livestock, silver, and gold. <sup>3</sup>From the Negeb he traveled by stages toward Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had formerly stood, <sup>4</sup>the site where he had first built the altar; and there Abram invoked the LORD by name.

<sup>5</sup>Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, <sup>6</sup>so that the land could not support them if they stayed together; their possessions were so great that they could not live together. <sup>7</sup>There were quarrels between the herders of Abram's livestock and the herders of Lot's livestock. At this time the Canaanites and the Perizzites were living in the land.

<sup>8</sup>So Abram said to Lot: "Let there be no strife between you and me, or between your herders and my herders, for we are kindred. <sup>9</sup>Is not the whole land available? Please separate from me. If you prefer the left, I will go to the right; if you prefer the right, I will go to the left." <sup>10</sup>Lot looked about and saw how abundantly watered the whole Jordan Plain was as far as Zoar, like the LORD's own garden, or like Egypt. This was before the LORD had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. <sup>11</sup>Lot, therefore, chose for himself the whole Jordan Plain and set out eastward. Thus they separated from each other. <sup>12</sup>Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the Plain, pitching his tents near Sodom. <sup>13</sup>Now the inhabitants of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD.

<sup>14</sup>After Lot had parted from him, the LORD said to Abram: Look about you, and from where you are, gaze to the north and south, east and west; <sup>15</sup>all the land that you see I will give to you and your descendants forever. <sup>16</sup>I will make your descendants like the dust of the earth; if anyone could count the dust of the earth, your descendants too might be counted. <sup>17</sup>Get up and walk

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through the land, across its length and breadth, for I give it to you. <sup>18</sup>Abram moved his tents and went on to settle near the oak of Mamre, which is at Hebron. There he built an altar to the LORD.

## CHAPTER 14

### *The Four Kings*

<sup>1</sup>When Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer king of Elam, and Tidal king of Goiim <sup>2</sup>made war on Bera king of Sodom, Birsha king of Gomorrah, Shinab king of Admah, Shemeber king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar), <sup>3</sup>all the latter kings joined forces in the Valley of Siddim (that is, the Salt Sea). <sup>4</sup>For twelve years they had served Chedorlaomer, but in the thirteenth year they rebelled. <sup>5</sup>In the fourteenth year Chedorlaomer and the kings allied with him came and defeated the Rephaim in Ashteroth-karnaim, the Zuzim in Ham, the Emim in Shaveh-kiriathaim, <sup>6</sup>and the Horites in the hill country of Seir, as far as El-paran, close by the wilderness. <sup>7</sup>They then turned back and came to En-mishpat (that is, Kadesh), and they subdued the whole country of both the Amalekites and the Amorites who lived in Hazazon-tamar. <sup>8</sup>Thereupon the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admah, the king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar) marched out, and in the Valley of Siddim they went into battle against them: <sup>9</sup>against Chedorlaomer king of Elam, Tidal king of Goiim, Amraphel king of Shinar, and Arioch king of Ellasar—four kings against five. <sup>10</sup>Now the Valley of Siddim was full of bitumen pits; and as the king of Sodom and the king of Gomorrah fled, they fell into these, while the rest fled to the mountains. <sup>11</sup>The victors seized all the possessions and food supplies of Sodom and Gomorrah and then went their way. <sup>12</sup>They took with them Abram's nephew Lot, who had been living in Sodom, as well as his possessions, and departed.

<sup>13</sup>A survivor came and brought the news to Abram the Hebrew, who was camping at the oak

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that will be given to him. Abram travels to Mamre, at Hebron, his first stop in the land of Canaan; he builds an altar to the Lord as is his custom.

### **14:1-24 Abram and the kings**

Lot's choice of territory quickly becomes complicated when four kings attack Sodom and four other cities. The episode itself is complex in several ways. The historical and geographical details cannot be verified. Furthermore, Abram is portrayed here in a different light from the surrounding chapters; there he was a patriarch and shepherd; here he is the commander of an army. His troops set out in pursuit of Lot's captors, traveling as far as Damascus, far to the north. This incident in the Genesis narrative is probably a later addition, inserted to address a question that was pertinent to the writer, but beyond the scope of this commentary. We will focus on another incident, namely, Abram's meeting with the two kings, the king of Sodom and Melchizedek of Salem, on his return from Damascus. Melchizedek welcomes Abram and Lot by performing a priestly ritual.

Several of the geographical locations have been identified; for example, Salem is the ancient name of the city of Jerusalem. The climactic scene in the chapter is Melchizedek's priestly ritual to welcome Abram back from his rescue mission. This scene sets the stage for David's reign and the years that followed it: Melchizedek is both king and priest. The narrative identifies him as king of Salem, and then describes a ritual that involves bread and wine and a blessing of Abram by Melchizedek. Melchizedek blesses Abram in the name of "God Most High," the chief deity among the Canaanite gods. The serving of bread and wine might be a simple act of hospitality, or might also represent a religious ritual to celebrate Abram's success. Its larger significance is thought to lie in its foreshadowing of three realities: the religious importance of Jerusalem, the combined royal and priestly offices of the king of the area, and the eventual loyalty of Abram's descendants to the Israelite king in Jerusalem. In a similar incident in 2 Samuel 6:13, David offers



a sacrifice to the Lord during the ceremony of bringing the ark into Jerusalem (see also Ps 110:4). These foreshadowings of future situations suggest that the material is among the latest in the Genesis narrative. From the vantage point of the monarchy, the Priestly editor included details about the past that link the people's current reality with those long-ago days when Abram was new in the land, demonstrating that the Lord's protection of the people extended back into their earliest history. In a manner consistent with the early Christian custom of linking Christ to figures in the Old Testament, the author of Hebrews drew a resemblance between Melchizedek and Jesus Christ (Heb 7:1-4).

### 15:1-21 The promise to Abram

The narrative resumes with another divine promise that the Lord will protect Abram and give him a great reward. The first announcement, in verse 1, is vague compared to the earlier ones, but Abram's response articulates the profound problem foreshadowed above: the Lord promises offspring, but Abram's wife is barren. The conversation has a prophetic tone. The phrase "the word of the LORD came to . . ." appears frequently in the prophetic books, as does the context of a vision. The expression, "Do not fear" also occurs frequently in the prophetic books, when the Lord offers assurance to the prophet about a pressing problem, and the prophet in turn reassures the people. This prophetic language in the Lord's words to Abram speaks to the special relationship that Abram enjoys with the Lord. What is more, even though Abram still has no children, the divine speech foreshadows a change by which Abram will have many descendants.

The exchange resembles other biblical forms as well: verses 1-6 resemble a call narrative and verses 7-21 include elements of a covenant ritual. We will look at the narrative from these two points of view individually. First, a call consists of a theophany or appearance of God, a commission from God to perform a particular task, a question or objection on the part of the one receiving the call, and a reiteration

of Mamre the Amorite, a kinsman of Eshcol and Aner; these were allies of Abram. <sup>14</sup>When Abram heard that his kinsman had been captured, he mustered three hundred and eighteen of his retainers, born in his house, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. <sup>15</sup>He and his servants deployed against them at night, defeated them, and pursued them as far as Hobah, which is north of Damascus. <sup>16</sup>He recovered all the possessions. He also recovered his kinsman Lot and his possessions, along with the women and the other people.

<sup>17</sup>When Abram returned from his defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were allied with him, the king of Sodom went out to greet him in the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley).

<sup>18</sup>Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine. He was a priest of God Most High. <sup>19</sup>He blessed Abram with these words:

"Blessed be Abram by God Most High,  
the creator of heaven and earth;

<sup>20</sup>And blessed be God Most High,  
who delivered your foes into your hand."

Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

<sup>21</sup>The king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give me the captives; the goods you may keep." <sup>22</sup>But Abram replied to the king of Sodom: "I have sworn to the LORD, God Most High, the creator of heaven and earth, <sup>23</sup>that I would not take so much as a thread or a sandal strap from anything that is yours, so that you cannot say, 'I made Abram rich.' <sup>24</sup>Nothing for me except what my servants have consumed and the share that is due to the men who went with me—Aner, Eshcol and Mamre; let them take their share."

## CHAPTER 15

### *The Covenant with Abram*

<sup>1</sup>Some time afterward, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: Do not fear, Abram! I am your shield; I will make your reward very great.

<sup>2</sup>But Abram said, "Lord GOD, what can you give me, if I die childless and have only a servant

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of my household, Eliezer of Damascus?”<sup>3</sup> Abram continued, “Look, you have given me no offspring, so a servant of my household will be my heir.”<sup>4</sup> Then the word of the LORD came to him: No, that one will not be your heir; your own offspring will be your heir.<sup>5</sup> He took him outside and said: Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can. Just so, he added, will your descendants be.<sup>6</sup> Abram put his faith in the LORD, who attributed it to him as an act of righteousness.

<sup>7</sup>He then said to him: I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land as a possession.<sup>8</sup> “Lord GOD,” he asked, “how will I know that I will possess it?”<sup>9</sup> He answered him: Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.<sup>10</sup> He brought him all these, split them in two, and placed each half opposite the other; but the birds he did not cut up.<sup>11</sup> Birds of prey swooped down on the carcasses, but Abram scared them away.<sup>12</sup> As the sun was about to set, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a great, dark dread descended upon him.

<sup>13</sup>Then the LORD said to Abram: Know for certain that your descendants will reside as aliens in a land not their own, where they shall be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years.<sup>14</sup> But I will bring judgment on the nation they must serve, and after this they will go out with great wealth.<sup>15</sup> You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace; you will be buried at a ripe old age.<sup>16</sup> In the fourth generation your descendants will return here, for the wickedness of the Amorites is not yet complete.

<sup>17</sup>When the sun had set and it was dark, there appeared a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch, which passed between those pieces.<sup>18</sup> On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the Great River, the Euphrates,<sup>19</sup> the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites,<sup>20</sup> the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim,<sup>21</sup> the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.

of the call followed by a sign of confirmation. Here Abram has a vision (v. 1) in which the Lord makes a promise to him. Abram questions the promise on the grounds that he is childless (vv. 2-3). The Lord repeats the promise, expanding on it and adding the sign of the heavens: Abram’s descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky (vv. 4-5). The text then asserts that Abram’s faith in God is a righteous act; that is, Abram is in a right relationship with the Lord.

In verse 7 the commission seems to begin all over again in the form of a covenant ritual. The passage includes a historical introduction, an enumeration of the terms of the covenant, a sign confirming it, a list of the blessings and curses to follow obedience or disobedience, and an arrangement for promulgating the covenant. Verses 7-21 include most of these elements. The historical introduction announces that the same Lord who first brought Abram out of Ur is now giving him the land. In 12:1, when the Lord first instructed Abram to begin his journey, he was already in Haran. Here the text extends divine guidance all the way back to the family’s departure from Ur (11:31), suggesting that it was the Lord who prompted Terah to move his family to Canaan. Then, as in call narratives, Abram responds with a question. (See, for instance, Exod 3:11; Jer 1:6).

The divine response is a call for a covenant ritual. This ancient Near Eastern ceremony involved cutting prescribed animals in two; then the two covenant parties walked between the pieces, binding themselves to the terms of the covenant under penalty of a fate similar to that of the slaughtered animals. The precise significance of the swooping birds of prey is not known; it can be understood as a way of expressing Abram’s willingness to abide by the terms of the agreement even when danger threatens. Likewise, the liminal light of sunset highlights the unknown dimension of Abram’s agreement with the Lord.

In verse 13 the text interrupts its description of the covenant ceremony to reiterate and elaborate on the Lord’s promise of land. In ad-

dition, it alludes to a period of slavery that anticipates the exodus. Finally, a sign in the form of fire witnesses and confirms the sacred agreement the Lord has made with Abram. This particular ceremony does not include a list of blessings and curses or an arrangement to promulgate the treaty, as Abram still does not have a family among whom to publicize it. The covenant ritual solemnizes the divine promise to Abram, and also sets the stage for the next episode in the couple's efforts to have children.

Here the type scene of the barren mother appears. This kind of story involves a childless woman who gives birth to a son as a result of divine intervention. She takes specific steps to assure that her son will be successful, and often the son becomes a leader at a time of transition or crisis. The barren mother type scene has three models: promise, competition, and re-

quest. According to the promise model, a divine messenger appears and promises a son. That promise is confirmed, even though the recipient does not believe it. The son is born and receives a name that bears some significance to his life and work.

The Bible includes this kind of promise in the stories of Sarai here in Genesis, and also in the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1–2. The promises of sons to Zechariah and Mary in Luke's Gospel follow this model as well (Luke 1–2). Here the initial promise is not specific, only that the Lord will give Abram a great reward. Abram's question responds to the earlier promises in 12:2-3 and 12:7 that refer to descendants. In the formal covenant section that follows (v. 13), the divine response confirms the initial promise of biological descendants to Abram. Later in the narrative the remaining elements of the promise model appear.

**EXPLORING LESSON THREE**

1. Why does God object to the humans' plan to build a tower (11:1-6)? (See 3:5, 22.)

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2. How might Genesis 1:28 and 9:1 help in understanding God's purpose in scattering the humans (11:4, 8-9)?

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3. a) Where was Terah taking his family when they left Ur of the Chaldeans (11:31)?

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b) How far did he get (11:31)?

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4. Why is the promise of a child and land so important in the account of Abram's call (Gen 12:1-9)?

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5. Has the desire to bear children been a concern in your own circle of family and friends (11:30)? In what ways?

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6. Abram left behind what was familiar (12:1-4). Recall a time when you have felt uprooted. In what ways have you come to see God's involvement in that experience?

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7. a) Does Abram's behavior in the matter of Pharaoh and Sarai (12:10-19) say anything about his faith in God's promises? (See 12:1-5.)

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b) Why might God have punished Pharaoh but not Abram?

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8. How did Lot come to live near Sodom (13:5-13)?

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9. How is Melchizedek depicted in 14:18-20 and in subsequent passages of Scripture? (See Ps 110; Heb 5:6-10; 7:1-17.)

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10. How does God assure Abram that the land he is in will someday belong to his descendants (15:7-21)?

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## CLOSING PRAYER

*Prayer*

*Abram went as the LORD directed him . . .*

(Gen 12:4)

God of our ancestors, your servant Abram began his response to you in obedience. When you call us to leave something behind, help us to respond in loving obedience, and open the way for us to move forward. We pray for those who faithfully follow you and serve as models for us, especially . . .

## LESSON FOUR

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### Genesis 16–20

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Begin your personal study and group discussion with a simple and sincere prayer such as:

#### *Prayer*

*O God of creation, be with me in my study and reflection, and continue to create in me a hunger for your voice.*

Read the Bible text of Genesis 16–20 found in the outside columns of pages 56–65, highlighting what stands out to you.

Read the accompanying commentary to add to your understanding.

Respond to the questions on pages 66–67, Exploring Lesson Four.

The Closing Prayer on page 68 is for your personal use and may be used at the end of group discussion.

## CHAPTER 16

### *Birth of Ishmael*

<sup>1</sup>Abram's wife Sarai had borne him no children. Now she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar. <sup>2</sup>Sarai said to Abram: "The LORD has kept me from bearing children. Have intercourse with my maid; perhaps I will have sons through her." Abram obeyed Sarai. <sup>3</sup>Thus, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, his wife Sarai took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife. <sup>4</sup>He had intercourse with her, and she became pregnant. As soon as Hagar knew she was pregnant, her mistress lost stature in her eyes. <sup>5</sup>So Sarai said to Abram: "This outrage against me is your fault. I myself gave my maid to your embrace; but ever since she knew she was pregnant, I have lost stature in her eyes. May the LORD decide between you and me!" <sup>6</sup>Abram told Sarai: "Your maid is in your power. Do to her what you regard as right." Sarai then mistreated her so much that Hagar ran away from her.

<sup>7</sup>The LORD's angel found her by a spring in the wilderness, the spring on the road to Shur, <sup>8</sup>and he asked, "Hagar, maid of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She answered, "I am running away from my mistress, Sarai." <sup>9</sup>But the LORD's angel told her: "Go back to your mistress and submit to her authority. <sup>10</sup>I will make your descendants so numerous," added the LORD's angel, "that they will be too many to count." <sup>11</sup>Then the LORD's angel said to her:

"You are now pregnant and shall bear a son;  
you shall name him Ishmael,  
For the LORD has heeded your affliction.

<sup>12</sup>He shall be a wild ass of a man,  
his hand against everyone,  
and everyone's hand against him;  
Alongside all his kindred  
shall he encamp."

<sup>13</sup>To the LORD who spoke to her she gave a name, saying, "You are God who sees me"; she

*continue*



### **16:1-16 The birth of Ishmael**

The narrative returns to the dilemma of Abram and Sarai's childlessness in the story of the birth of Ishmael to Abram and Hagar, Sarai's maid. Sarai proposes, in keeping with ancient Near Eastern custom, that Abram father a child through Hagar. While we today find this a disconcerting arrangement, it illustrates the importance of children in the ancient world. Large families with many hands to do the work were a necessity for subsistence. In addition, it was a point of honor for a man to father a large family who would carry on his name.

This very human story depicts Sarai's frustration, embarrassment, and jealousy; Hagar's disdain for Sarai; and Abram's quiet lack of involvement in the controversy that ensues. In fact, Abram responds to Sarai just as he did to God: he heeds her request. When Sarai blames him for causing the problem, he responds to her accusation by returning Hagar to Sarai's care as the law provided for slaves who overstepped their boundaries. But Sarai's punishment exceeds Hagar's crime, and as a result of Sarai's mistreatment the maid runs away.

Hagar, like Abram and Sarai, receives divine promises when the Lord's messenger finds her, questions her, and sends her back to Sarai. She will have many descendants beginning with the son she carries in her womb. The messenger

gives a name to the unborn child, and interprets the name for Hagar. The naming of a child had several layers of meaning in the ancient world. The significance of the one who gives the name foreshadows the importance of the child. In addition, the specific name foretells something about the character of the child, or about the life the child will live. Here the message promises divine care for Hagar and her son; it also hints that the tension between his mother and her mistress will continue in her son's generation between him and other peoples. Hagar in turn gives a name to the Lord, expressing her own incredulity that she survives the experience of seeing the Lord. The incident takes place by a spring, and the account ends with the etiological note that the spring, now referred to as a well, is named to acknowledge Hagar's religious experience in that place. We can assume that the place was known among the people who told the story throughout the generations.

The incident is significant in several ways. First, it demonstrates the Lord's continuing care for all the people, including Hagar. It also teases the reader, suggesting a possible solution to the problem of Abram and Sarai's childlessness. That possibility seems all the more realistic in light of Abram's advancing age.

This episode introduces another model of the barren mother type scene: the competition model. That model includes five elements: a wife is childless; her husband has another wife; the rival wife gives birth to a child, causing conflict; God intervenes to give a child to the childless wife; and finally, a significant name is given to the child. Here Sarai has no children; she gives her maid Hagar to Abram for the purpose of bearing him a child; Hagar bears a son, causing conflict between herself and Sarai; and the child receives the name Ishmael. At this point Sarai still does not bear a child; that element comes only after several more delays in the narrative.

### 17:1-27 The covenant with Abraham

The chapter relates an additional development that, on a narrative level, postpones yet again the fulfillment of the promise of children to Abram and Sarai. This episode is P's version

meant, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after he saw me?" <sup>14</sup>That is why the well is called Beer-lahai-roi. It is between Kadesh and Bered.

<sup>15</sup>Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram named the son whom Hagar bore him Ishmael. <sup>16</sup>Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

## CHAPTER 17

### *Covenant of Circumcision*

<sup>1</sup>When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said: I am God the Almighty. Walk in my presence and be blameless.

<sup>2</sup>Between you and me I will establish my covenant, and I will multiply you exceedingly.

<sup>3</sup>Abram fell face down and God said to him:

<sup>4</sup>For my part, here is my covenant with you: you are to become the father of a multitude of nations.

<sup>5</sup>No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I am making you the father of a multitude of nations. <sup>6</sup>I will make you exceedingly fertile; I will make nations of you; kings will stem from you. <sup>7</sup>I will maintain my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout the ages as an everlasting covenant, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. <sup>8</sup>I will give to you and to your descendants after you the land in which you are now residing as aliens, the whole land of Canaan, as a permanent possession; and I will be their God. <sup>9</sup>God said to Abraham: For your part, you and your descendants after you must keep my covenant throughout the ages. <sup>10</sup>This is the covenant between me and you and your descendants after you that you must keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. <sup>11</sup>Circumcise the flesh of your foreskin. That will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. <sup>12</sup>Throughout the ages, every male among you, when he is eight days old, shall be circumcised, including houseborn slaves and those acquired with money from any foreigner who is not of your descendants. <sup>13</sup>Yes, both

*continue*



the houseborn slaves and those acquired with money must be circumcised. Thus my covenant will be in your flesh as an everlasting covenant. <sup>14</sup>If a male is uncircumcised, that is, if the flesh of his foreskin has not been cut away, such a one will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.

<sup>15</sup>God further said to Abraham: As for Sarai your wife, do not call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. <sup>16</sup>I will bless her, and I will give you a son by her. Her also will I bless; she will give rise to nations, and rulers of peoples will issue from her. <sup>17</sup>Abraham fell face down and laughed as he said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah give birth at ninety?" <sup>18</sup>So Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael could live in your favor!" <sup>19</sup>God replied: Even so, your wife Sarah is to bear you a son, and you shall call him Isaac. It is with him that I will maintain my covenant as an everlasting covenant and with his descendants after him. <sup>20</sup>Now as for Ishmael, I will heed you: I hereby bless him. I will make him fertile and will multiply him exceedingly. He will become the father of twelve chieftains, and I will make of him a great nation. <sup>21</sup>But my covenant I will maintain with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you by this time next year. <sup>22</sup>When he had finished speaking with Abraham, God departed from him.

<sup>23</sup>Then Abraham took his son Ishmael and all his slaves, whether born in his house or acquired with his money—every male among the members of Abraham's household—and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins on that same day, as God had told him to do. <sup>24</sup>Abraham was ninety-nine years old when the flesh of his foreskin was circumcised, <sup>25</sup>and his son Ishmael was thirteen years old when the flesh of his foreskin was circumcised. <sup>26</sup>Thus, on that same day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised; <sup>27</sup>and all the males of his household, including the slaves born in his house or acquired with his money from foreigners, were circumcised with him.

*continue*

of the incident told by J in chapter 15. Thirteen years have passed since Ishmael's birth when the Lord appears again to Abram and begins with a formal introduction, and then changes Abram's name to Abraham to reflect his role as father of nations. The terms of the agreement ask something of both parties. God repeats the promise of descendants and land, and promises to be their God. The people are enjoined to keep the covenant, that is, to adhere to the terms of the divine-human relationship, and all the males are expected to be circumcised. The origins of this requirement, given in some detail, are puzzling to us, but were undoubtedly understood by ancient peoples. What we do know is that the people living in exile in Babylon during the sixth century B.C. looked upon circumcision as the sign of their identity as exiles from Judah, in contrast to the Babylonians, who did not practice it. In keeping with the theory that the Priestly writers and editors lived and worked in Babylon during the exile, it is quite possible that this became an important sign of identity at that time.

Sarai also receives a new name, Sarah, from God, confirming that she will be the mother of the promised son. Abraham's incredulity, amazement, and joy on hearing the promise cause his marvelously human reaction, which is all the more touching because heretofore his response was simply to do what he was asked. His laughter foreshadows the name of his promised son: Isaac, or "laughter." But he remains incredulous, and gives God an alternative proposal, to make Ishmael the favored one. This suggestion gives God the opportunity to clarify that Ishmael will receive the divine blessing and promise of a great nation; but the son of the covenant will be Isaac, whom Sarah will bear within the year.

The divine announcement that the birth of the child will take place within a year moves the promise a step closer to fulfillment. Then the narrative reports that Abraham circumcises all the males in his family as the Lord commanded. This brief note illustrates yet again Abraham's unwavering obedience to God's commands.



The vivid storytelling details characteristic of J are combined with P's solemn description of circumcision as the mark of the Lord's people.

The promise model of the barren mother type reappears in this episode. The Lord appears to Abraham (still Abram at the beginning of the episode), promising generations of descendants in verses 2-10. Then in verse 16 God explicitly announces that Sarah will be the child's mother. In response to Abraham's incredulous response God reiterates the promise and gives a name to the promised child. But several more events must intervene before the child is born.

### 18:1-15 The three visitors

Once again Abraham receives the divine promise of a child. The text juxtaposes the appearance of the Lord with the coming of three visitors in the heat of the day, creating several questions about the meaning of the text. Is the Lord one of the three visitors? Do all three guests represent the Lord? How is it that Abraham sees three people and bows down in respectful welcome; but when he speaks he seems to address only one person? As the text stands, it points out that God is revealed

## CHAPTER 18

### Abraham's Visitors

<sup>1</sup>The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oak of Mamre, as he sat in the entrance of his tent, while the day was growing hot. <sup>2</sup>Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them; and bowing to the ground, <sup>3</sup>he said: "Sir, if it please you, do not go on past your servant. <sup>4</sup>Let some water be brought, that you may bathe your feet, and then rest under the tree. <sup>5</sup>Now that you have come to your servant, let me bring you a little food, that you may refresh yourselves; and afterward you may go on your way." "Very well," they replied, "do as you have said."

<sup>6</sup>Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quick, three measures of bran flour! Knead it and make bread." <sup>7</sup>He ran to the herd, picked out a tender, choice calf, and gave it to a servant, who quickly prepared it. <sup>8</sup>Then he got some curds and milk, as well as the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them, waiting on them under the tree while they ate.

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**Birth announcements** are usually told according to the same pattern. Not all elements appear in every story and they are not always in order. Compare these stories to the announcements of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus in Luke 1.

	Ishmael Gen 16	Isaac Gen 17-18		Samson Judg 13
Appearance of the LORD (or angel)	16:7-9	17:1-2	18:1-2	13:3, 10
Signs of fear or reverence		17:3	18:2	
Divine promise: a son will be born; this is his name; this is his future	16:11 16:11 16:12	17:16 17:19 17:19	18:10	13:3 13:5
Objection		17:17-18	18:12	13:8, 17?
Reassurance		17:19-21	18:13-14	13:19-21?

<sup>9</sup>“Where is your wife Sarah?” they asked him. “There in the tent,” he replied. <sup>10</sup>One of them said, “I will return to you about this time next year, and Sarah will then have a son.” Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent, just behind him. <sup>11</sup>Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years, and Sarah had stopped having her menstrual periods. <sup>12</sup>So Sarah laughed to herself and said, “Now that I am worn out and my husband is old, am I still to have sexual pleasure?” <sup>13</sup>But the LORD said to Abraham: “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really bear a child, old as I am?’ <sup>14</sup>Is anything too marvelous for the LORD to do? At the appointed time, about this time next year, I will return to you, and Sarah will have a son.” <sup>15</sup>Sarah lied, saying, “I did not laugh,” because she was afraid. But he said, “Yes, you did.”

**Abraham Intercedes for Sodom**

<sup>16</sup>With Abraham walking with them to see them on their way, the men set out from there and looked down toward Sodom. <sup>17</sup>The LORD considered: Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, <sup>18</sup>now that he is to become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth are to find blessing in him? <sup>19</sup>Indeed, I have singled him out that he may direct his children and his household in the future to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD may put into effect for Abraham the promises he made about him. <sup>20</sup>So the LORD said: The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin so grave, <sup>21</sup>that I must go down to see whether or not their actions are as bad as the cry against them that comes to me. I mean to find out.

<sup>22</sup>As the men turned and walked on toward Sodom, Abraham remained standing before the LORD. <sup>23</sup>Then Abraham drew near and said: “Will you really sweep away the righteous with the wicked? <sup>24</sup>Suppose there were fifty righteous people in the city; would you really sweep away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people within it? <sup>25</sup>Far be it from you to do such a thing, to kill the righteous with the wicked, so that

*continue*

through humans, and through what is at first glance a visit from three travelers.

Many details suggest extremes: the heat of the desert afternoon, the three men who are related to the divine in some mysterious way, ninety-nine-year-old Abraham’s energetic greeting, the feast he asks Sarah to prepare for the visitors. Then one of the guests asks a question that would seem impertinent in ancient Near Eastern society, “Where is your wife Sarah?” Women did not share the table with men, and the visitors were surely aware of that custom. The question seems inappropriately familiar until the visitor’s next statement reveals the reason for his inquiry: when he returns in a year, Sarah will have a son. The Lord made the same promise in 17:21; this assertion by the visitor confirms both the promise and the date.

Now it is Sarah’s turn to laugh. We learn that she has been listening to the conversation from her place out of sight, and she reacts as did Abraham: she laughs at the thought of bearing a child at her advanced age. Without realizing, she anticipates the name to be given to the boy. The follow-up question, “Why did Sarah laugh?” comes from the Lord, not from one of the three guests, and is directed to Abraham. But Sarah herself responds, denying that she laughed. Yet the visitor/the Lord hears the laugh: the narrative explains that it is a sign of her fear in response to the awesome announcement she has heard, and the amazing future it represents for her.

The entire incident bespeaks complexity—the human and divine realms are blurred, singular and plural forms intermingle, the normally reticent Abraham extends gracious hospitality, seemingly impossible promises are made, private responses become public—in keeping with the complicated reality the visitors announce: this elderly couple will soon be parents. As readers, we are tempted to join in the laughter with mixed emotions of relief, amazement, and puzzlement in the face of the seemingly insurmountable obstacle of the very advanced ages of husband and wife.

Here the promise model of the barren mother type scene highlights Sarah: it is she who cannot believe the messenger's word, and expresses her amazement in laughter. The messenger confirms the promise, not directly to Sarah but to Abraham: when he returns in a year, Sarah will have a child.

### 18:16-33 Abraham intercedes for Sodom

The narrative returns to Sodom, where it left off in chapter 14. While Abraham accompanies his three guests on their journey, the Lord reflects on whether to let Abraham know about coming events. The incident is not simply about the destruction of Sodom; in larger terms it is about the developing relationship between the Lord and Abraham. The Lord has made him the father and teacher of many nations; therefore the Lord gives him information that will help him fulfill that responsibility. The Lord decides to investigate the rumors of sin in Sodom and Gomorrah.

Verse 22 takes us back to the puzzling identity of Abraham's three visitors. We learn that the men continue walking while the Lord stays behind with Abraham, who engages the Lord in conversation. He starts with the assumption that the Lord will completely destroy the sinful city and questions the Lord about destroying innocent people. He persuades the Lord to think again about this plan that is out of character for the Deity. Abraham continues to press the question until the Lord agrees that ten innocent people are enough to warrant saving the city. Abraham has grown from silently obedient to passionately protective, an essential trait for the one destined to father many nations; he convinces the Lord to spare the city for the sake of the few righteous ones. This scene does not mention the possibility of repentance to forestall the destruction of the city, as we find in the prophetic books. (See, for instance, Jer 8:6; 9:4; Ezek 14:6; 18:30.)

### 19:1-29 Destruction of Sodom

Chapter 19 begins with the visit of the other two of Abraham's guests to Lot. The word "an-

the righteous and the wicked are treated alike! Far be it from you! Should not the judge of all the world do what is just?"<sup>26</sup>The LORD replied: If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.<sup>27</sup> Abraham spoke up again: "See how I am presuming to speak to my Lord, though I am only dust and ashes!<sup>28</sup>What if there are five less than fifty righteous people? Will you destroy the whole city because of those five?" I will not destroy it, he answered, if I find forty-five there.<sup>29</sup>But Abraham persisted, saying, "What if only forty are found there?" He replied: I will refrain from doing it for the sake of the forty.<sup>30</sup>Then he said, "Do not let my Lord be angry if I go on. What if only thirty are found there?" He replied: I will refrain from doing it if I can find thirty there.<sup>31</sup>Abraham went on, "Since I have thus presumed to speak to my Lord, what if there are no more than twenty?" I will not destroy it, he answered, for the sake of the twenty.<sup>32</sup>But he persisted: "Please, do not let my Lord be angry if I speak up this last time. What if ten are found there?" For the sake of the ten, he replied, I will not destroy it.

<sup>33</sup>The LORD departed as soon as he had finished speaking with Abraham, and Abraham returned home.

## CHAPTER 19

### *Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah*

<sup>1</sup>The two angels reached Sodom in the evening, as Lot was sitting at the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he got up to greet them; and bowing down with his face to the ground,<sup>2</sup>he said, "Please, my lords, come aside into your servant's house for the night, and bathe your feet; you can get up early to continue your journey." But they replied, "No, we will pass the night in the town square."<sup>3</sup>He urged them so strongly, however, that they turned aside to his place and entered his house. He prepared a banquet for them, baking unleavened bread, and they dined.

<sup>4</sup>Before they went to bed, the townsmen of Sodom, both young and old—all the people to the

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last man—surrounded the house. <sup>5</sup>They called to Lot and said to him, “Where are the men who came to your house tonight? Bring them out to us that we may have sexual relations with them.” <sup>6</sup>Lot went out to meet them at the entrance. When he had shut the door behind him, <sup>7</sup>he said, “I beg you, my brothers, do not do this wicked thing! <sup>8</sup>I have two daughters who have never had sexual relations with men. Let me bring them out to you, and you may do to them as you please. But do not do anything to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.” <sup>9</sup>They replied, “Stand back! This man,” they said, “came here as a resident alien, and now he dares to give orders! We will treat you worse than them!” With that, they pressed hard against Lot, moving in closer to break down the door. <sup>10</sup>But his guests put out their hands, pulled Lot inside with them, and closed the door; <sup>11</sup>they struck the men at the entrance of the house, small and great, with such a blinding light that they were utterly unable to find the doorway.

<sup>12</sup>Then the guests said to Lot: “Who else belongs to you here? Sons-in-law, your sons, your daughters, all who belong to you in the city—take them away from this place! <sup>13</sup>We are about to destroy this place, for the outcry reaching the LORD against those here is so great that the LORD has sent us to destroy it.” <sup>14</sup>So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who had contracted marriage with his daughters. “Come on, leave this place,” he told them; “the LORD is about to destroy the city.” But his sons-in-law thought he was joking.

<sup>15</sup>As dawn was breaking, the angels urged Lot on, saying, “Come on! Take your wife with you and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away in the punishment of the city.” <sup>16</sup>When he hesitated, the men, because of the LORD’s compassion for him, seized his hand and the hands of his wife and his two daughters and led them to safety outside the city. <sup>17</sup>As soon as they had brought them outside, they said: “Flee for your life! Do not look back or stop anywhere on the Plain. Flee to the hills at once, or you will be swept away.” <sup>18</sup>“Oh, no, my lords!” Lot replied

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gels” is the English translation of the Hebrew word meaning “messengers,” and designates anyone who delivers a word on behalf of another person. Here the two are called “angels,” highlighting the ambiguous identity of the three visitors in chapter 18. Later in this chapter they announce on God’s behalf, “We are about to destroy this place” (v. 13). Their visit begins with events that parallel the visit of the three men to Abraham: Lot receives the two visitors and bows to them in respectful welcome. He invites them to stay, and when they agree he prepares a meal for them.

At that point the similarities end: the meal Lot prepares is quite simple in contrast to the elaborate feast Abraham arranged for his guests. This detail does not begin to foreshadow the horror that is about to take place. Immediately the sinfulness of the Sodomites becomes apparent in their determination to violate the guests. While today we find Lot’s offer to give his daughters to the men horrific, it speaks to the high priority given to hospitality among ancient Near Eastern nomads: a host protected his guests, regardless of the cost. This incident clarifies the sins of the city of Sodom alluded to in chapter 18: rampant lack of hospitality and sexual aberrations.

The quick action of the guests saves both Lot and his daughters from the horror that might have ensued. The NABRE translation of 19:11, “with such a blinding light that they were utterly unable to find the doorway” is a bit ambiguous; the Hebrew text reads, “And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door.” The incident confirms the Lord’s assessment of the wickedness of the place, and the visitors urge Lot to remove his family at once, before the city is destroyed for its sins.

After all that transpires with the two guests during the night, we expect Lot to depart immediately. Instead, the angels must cajole and negotiate with him throughout the night. First, the fiancés of Lot’s two daughters refuse to take the warning seriously. Then at dawn the angels press him to take the other members,



but Lot hesitates. The visitors remove them from the house and insist that they depart immediately and not look back or stop. Lot still resists, and begs to be allowed to go to a small town nearby. The response comes from one angel, implying, as in the story of Abraham's guests, that the angel is actually the Lord, who agrees to accommodate Lot's request.

After all these steps Lot's wife violates the command not to look back, and she becomes a pillar of salt (see also Wis 10:7). This detail is a bit of etiological folklore: at the southern end of the Dead Sea, the salt deposits create bizarre shapes, some of which resemble human beings; tour guides point out which is their own favorite "Mrs. Lot." Here in the story the presence of a salt formation is explained as Lot's wife's punishment for her disobedience. In fact, the woman probably suffered the same end as all those who remained in Sodom: the sulphur and salt destroyed everything. (Salt is a symbol of death and destruction; see Judg 9:45.)

Verses 27-28 recount that Abraham witnesses the destructive scene. Again we learn nothing about the reaction of this very reticent man, but we do find out that it is for his sake that God spares Lot from the debacle.

### 19:30-38 Lot and his daughters

The action of Lot's daughters suggests they are living in very isolated circumstances after the destruction of Sodom. While the incident with their father would be offensive to modern sensitivity, it shows the daughters' desperation and ingenuity in assuring offspring for their family. The incident also serves another purpose; that is, the two sons become the ancestors of the Ammonite and Moabite peoples. Both of these groups were neighbors of Israel; this brief account establishes the reason for the animosity between them and the Israelites. In addition, the episode highlights the importance of having children in ancient Near Eastern society. It also serves as a reminder that Sarah still has not given birth to the promised child, a concern that becomes acute when the following incident threatens yet again to thwart the divine promise of a son.

to them. <sup>19</sup>"You have already shown favor to your servant, doing me the great kindness of saving my life. But I cannot flee to the hills, or the disaster will overtake and kill me. <sup>20</sup>Look, this town ahead is near enough to escape to. It is only a small place. Let me flee there—is it not a small place?—to save my life." <sup>21</sup>"Well, then," he replied, "I grant you this favor too. I will not overthrow the town you have mentioned. <sup>22</sup>Hurry, escape there! I cannot do anything until you arrive there." That is why the town is called Zoar.

<sup>23</sup>The sun had risen over the earth when Lot arrived in Zoar, <sup>24</sup>and the LORD rained down sulfur upon Sodom and Gomorrah, fire from the LORD out of heaven. <sup>25</sup>He overthrew those cities and the whole Plain, together with the inhabitants of the cities and the produce of the soil. <sup>26</sup>But Lot's wife looked back, and she was turned into a pillar of salt.

<sup>27</sup>The next morning Abraham hurried to the place where he had stood before the LORD. <sup>28</sup>As he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and the whole region of the Plain, he saw smoke over the land rising like the smoke from a kiln.

<sup>29</sup>When God destroyed the cities of the Plain, he remembered Abraham and sent Lot away from the upheaval that occurred when God overthrew the cities where Lot had been living.

### *Moabites and Ammonites*

<sup>30</sup>Since Lot was afraid to stay in Zoar, he and his two daughters went up from Zoar and settled in the hill country, where he lived with his two daughters in a cave. <sup>31</sup>The firstborn said to the younger: "Our father is getting old, and there is not a man in the land to have intercourse with us as is the custom everywhere. <sup>32</sup>Come, let us ply our father with wine and then lie with him, that we may ensure posterity by our father." <sup>33</sup>So that night they plied their father with wine, and the firstborn went in and lay with her father; but he was not aware of her lying down or getting up. <sup>34</sup>The next day the firstborn said to the younger: "Last night I lay with my father. Let us ply him with wine again tonight, and then you go in and lie with him, that we may ensure posterity

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by our father.”<sup>35</sup>So that night, too, they plied their father with wine, and then the younger one went in and lay with him; but he was not aware of her lying down or getting up.

<sup>36</sup>Thus the two daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father. <sup>37</sup>The firstborn gave birth to a son whom she named Moab, saying, “From my father.” He is the ancestor of the Moabites of today. <sup>38</sup>The younger one, too, gave birth to a son, and she named him Ammon, saying, “The son of my kin.” He is the ancestor of the Ammonites of today.

## CHAPTER 20

### *Abraham at Gerar*

<sup>1</sup>From there Abraham journeyed on to the region of the Negeb, where he settled between Kadesh and Shur. While he resided in Gerar as an alien, <sup>2</sup>Abraham said of his wife Sarah, “She is my sister.” So Abimelech, king of Gerar, sent and took Sarah. <sup>3</sup>But God came to Abimelech in a dream one night and said to him: You are about to die because of the woman you have taken, for she has a husband. <sup>4</sup>Abimelech, who had not approached her, said: “O Lord, would you kill an innocent man? <sup>5</sup>Was he not the one who told me, ‘She is my sister’? She herself also stated, ‘He is my brother.’ I acted with pure heart and with clean hands.” <sup>6</sup>God answered him in the dream: Yes, I know you did it with a pure heart. In fact, it was I who kept you from sinning against me; that is why I did not let you touch her. <sup>7</sup>So now, return the man’s wife so that he may intercede for you, since he is a prophet, that you may live. If you do not return her, you can be sure that you and all who are yours will die.

<sup>8</sup>Early the next morning Abimelech called all his servants and informed them of everything that had happened, and the men were filled with fear. <sup>9</sup>Then Abimelech summoned Abraham and said to him: “What have you done to us! What wrong did I do to you that you would have brought such great guilt on me and my kingdom? You have treated me in an intolerable way. <sup>10</sup>What did you have in mind,” Abimelech asked him, “that you would do such a thing?” <sup>11</sup>Abraham answered, “I thought there would be no fear of God in this place, and so they

## 20:1-18 Sarah endangered again

The story returns to Abraham and Sarah, repeating the plot of the wife-sister story in chapter 12. This time the couple is in Gerar, and it is the local king Abimelech who takes Sarah into his house. This time Sarah explicitly supports Abraham’s ruse by agreeing that she is his sister. God’s warning to Abimelech saves him from punishment and saves Abraham and Sarah from further complications to their marriage. Abraham admits that fear has motivated him, and explains that Sarah is in fact the daughter of his father but not his mother; she is his half-sister. (We recall that the initial genealogy in Gen 11:27-29 does not include any mention of Sarah’s lineage.) Once again we are reminded that Sarah still has no son, in contrast to the women of Gerar, whom God healed after their wombs had been closed in punishment for Abimelech’s unwitting action. The event raises a question: Abraham puts the life of his wife in jeopardy because of his fear for his own life. How will he care for a newborn child, when he cares more for his own life than for his wife’s?

It is problematic for us today to see the extent to which other people suffer the consequences of Abraham’s efforts to protect himself. It is helpful to keep in mind that ancient people had a much stronger appreciation for the consequences of individual actions than we do today: they realized that every action affects all of creation. They understood that Abraham’s actions to protect himself had ramifications for everyone: his family members, Abimelech, and all the people. In addition, we see an example of *lex talionis*, the law of retribution that insists that a punishment fit the crime. Here, the life of Sarah’s promised child is endangered, and in consequence the future of Gerar is jeopardized.

But Abraham becomes the intercessor for the inhabitants of Gerar. Verse 17 reports that Abraham prays for Abimelech and his women, and as a result the Lord removes the punishment of sterility from them. Abraham’s concern for a family other than his own represents a broadening awareness for the well-being of everyone. (We recall that Abraham urges God

to spare the city of Sodom if a few righteous people can be found there; here Abraham convinces God to reverse the punishment he and Sarah caused by their ruse.)

would kill me on account of my wife. <sup>12</sup>Besides, she really is my sister, but only my father's daughter, not my mother's; and so she became my wife. <sup>13</sup>When God sent me wandering from my father's house, I asked her: 'Would you do me this favor? In whatever place we come to, say: He is my brother.'

<sup>14</sup>Then Abimelech took flocks and herds and male and female slaves and gave them to Abraham; and he restored his wife Sarah to him. <sup>15</sup>Then Abimelech said, "Here, my land is at your disposal; settle wherever you please." <sup>16</sup>To Sarah he said: "I hereby give your brother a thousand shekels of silver. This will preserve your honor before all who are with you and will exonerate you before everyone." <sup>17</sup>Abraham then interceded with God, and God restored health to Abimelech, to his wife, and his maidservants, so that they bore children; <sup>18</sup>for the LORD had closed every womb in Abimelech's household on account of Abraham's wife Sarah.

**EXPLORING LESSON FOUR**

1. How does Sarai seek to provide an heir for Abram, and how does she respond when it proves to be successful (16:1-6)?

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2. a) How does God respond to Hagar’s plight in the wilderness (16:7-14; 17:20)?

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b) How might this divine response be regarded as both a blessing and a curse?

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3. What was the religious significance of circumcision in the Old Testament (17:1-27)? (See Lev 12:3; Deut 10:12-16; 30:6; Josh 5:1-5; Jer 4:4.)

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4. Who are the three travelers who visit Abraham in Genesis 18?

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5. When has the news of someone’s pregnancy brought joy to you or someone close to you (18:12)?

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6. How does Abraham's negotiation with God concerning the fate of Sodom reflect the role of a prophet (18:16-33)? (See Gen 20:7; Exod 32:7-14; Jer 27:18.)

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7. Review Lot's response to the demands made by the men of Sodom (19:4-8). What does this say about the expectations and obligations of hospitality in the ancient Near East?

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8. What explanation does Genesis 19:30-38 give concerning the origin of ancient Israel's neighbors, the Moabites and the Ammonites?

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9. Why did Abraham tell Abimelech that Sarah was his sister (20:1-18)? Was he lying?

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## CLOSING PRAYER

### *Prayer*

*"Is anything too marvelous for the LORD to do? . . ."* (Gen 18:14)

Grant us, O God, the grace of wonder and the ability to recognize your hand in all the events of our lives. As we marvel at your actions in and around us, we pray in thanksgiving for the marvels we know in our own lives, especially . . .



## LESSON FIVE

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### Genesis 21:1–25:18

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Begin your personal study and group discussion with a simple and sincere prayer such as:

#### *Prayer*

*O God of creation, be with me in my study and reflection, and continue to create in me a hunger for your voice.*

Read the Bible text of Genesis 21:1–25:18 found in the outside columns of pages 70–80, highlighting what stands out to you.

Read the accompanying commentary to add to your understanding.

Respond to the questions on pages 81–82, Exploring Lesson Five.

The Closing Prayer on page 83 is for your personal use and may be used at the end of group discussion.

## CHAPTER 21

### *Birth of Isaac*

<sup>1</sup>The LORD took note of Sarah as he had said he would; the LORD did for her as he had promised. <sup>2</sup>Sarah became pregnant and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time that God had stated. <sup>3</sup>Abraham gave the name Isaac to this son of his whom Sarah bore him. <sup>4</sup>When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God had commanded. <sup>5</sup>Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. <sup>6</sup>Sarah then said, “God has given me cause to laugh, and all who hear of it will laugh with me. <sup>7</sup>Who would ever have told Abraham,” she added, “that Sarah would nurse children! Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.” <sup>8</sup>The child grew and was weaned, and Abraham held a great banquet on the day of the child’s weaning.

<sup>9</sup>Sarah noticed the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing with her son Isaac; <sup>10</sup>so she demanded of Abraham: “Drive out that slave and her son! No son of that slave is going to share the inheritance with my son Isaac!”

<sup>11</sup>Abraham was greatly distressed because it concerned a son of his. <sup>12</sup>But God said to Abraham: Do not be distressed about the boy or about your slave woman. Obey Sarah, no matter what she asks of you; for it is through Isaac that descendants will bear your name. <sup>13</sup>As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, since he too is your offspring.

<sup>14</sup>Early the next morning Abraham got some bread and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. Then, placing the child on her back, he sent her away. As she roamed aimlessly in the wilderness of Beer-sheba, <sup>15</sup>the water in the skin was used up. So she put the child down under one of the bushes, <sup>16</sup>and then went and sat down opposite him, about a bowshot away; for she said to herself, “I cannot watch the child die.” As she sat opposite him, she wept aloud. <sup>17</sup>God heard the boy’s voice, and God’s angel called to Hagar from heaven:

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### **21:1-21 Birth of Isaac and banishment of Hagar and Ishmael**

At last the narrative reports that Sarah is pregnant and bears the promised son. He is circumcised and receives the promised name of Isaac. This time his name, “Laughter,” relates to the joy his birth brings to his parents and all their acquaintances. The detail about Isaac’s circumcision illustrates P’s attention to details about religious practice: here we learn that Abraham carefully observes the covenant.

But in verse 9 the threats to the promise continue; Sarah works to ensure a future for her son in spite of her fear that Ishmael is a threat to him. Abraham’s love for both his sons is evident in his distress over Sarah’s demand (v. 11). The Lord reassures him that Ishmael, too, will receive divine protection and will himself become the ancestor of a great nation for Abraham’s sake. This incident reminds us of Sarah’s earlier insistence that Hagar leave, when the slave woman lorded it over Sarah because of Ishmael (ch. 16). This time it is Sarah’s jealousy that prompts her to request that Hagar and Ishmael go away.

In verses 14-17 grief permeates the separation of Hagar and Ishmael from Abraham. The narrative describes in detail Abraham’s preparations to send the two away, followed by Hagar

and Ishmael's hopeless meandering and forlorn cries in the wilderness. The divine reassurance is more than words: God promises a future for Ishmael, then provides a well, insuring they will have as much water as they need. (We will meet Ishmael's Egyptian descendants in chapter 37, when they rescue Joseph from the cistern, another place associated with water, where his brothers leave him.) Here the narrative anticipates the agonizing scene in chapter 22, when God asks Abraham to give up his son Isaac: both describe God's instructions to Abraham to give up his son, both enumerate Abraham's preparations in measured detail, both tell us the boy cries out, and in the end both tell of divine intervention on behalf of the boy.

Sarah's action to ensure her son's future completes the type scene of the barren mother. She does what she considers necessary in order to guarantee that Isaac will be the son who receives his father's inheritance.

### **21:22-34 The pact between Abraham and Abimelech**

In a flashback to chapter 20, we learn that Abimelech and Abraham negotiate a settlement to assure that their families can live in peace with one another, and that both groups will have access to water. Then Abraham plants a tree to stake his claim to the territory and mark it as a worship site, like the altars he built earlier.

### **22:1-24 God tests Abraham**

Chapter 22 tells one of the most poignant stories in the Bible: God's test of Abraham. In Hebrew, Abraham's first response to God is *hinneni*, a word that has no exact English equivalent. It translates, "Here I am," and connotes attentiveness, readiness, willingness. The word appears again in verses 7 and 11. Abraham responds before he knows that God is about to make an unthinkable request. God describes Isaac in three phrases that intensify the dreadful irony of the divine instruction: "Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love."

"What is the matter, Hagar? Do not fear; God has heard the boy's voice in this plight of his. <sup>18</sup>Get up, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand; for I will make of him a great nation."

<sup>19</sup>Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and then let the boy drink.

<sup>20</sup>God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert bowman.

<sup>21</sup>He lived in the wilderness of Paran. His mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

### ***The Covenant at Beer-sheba***

<sup>22</sup>At that time Abimelech, accompanied by Phicol, the commander of his army, said to Abraham: "God is with you in everything you do. <sup>23</sup>So now, swear to me by God at this place that you will not deal falsely with me or with my progeny and posterity, but will act as loyally toward me and the land in which you reside as I have acted toward you." <sup>24</sup>Abraham replied, "I so swear."

<sup>25</sup>Abraham, however, reproached Abimelech about a well that Abimelech's servants had seized by force. <sup>26</sup>"I have no idea who did that," Abimelech replied. "In fact, you never told me about it, nor did I ever hear of it until now."

<sup>27</sup>Then Abraham took sheep and cattle and gave them to Abimelech and the two made a covenant. <sup>28</sup>Abraham also set apart seven ewe lambs of the flock, <sup>29</sup>and Abimelech asked him, "What is the purpose of these seven ewe lambs that you have set apart?" <sup>30</sup>Abraham answered, "The seven ewe lambs you shall accept from me that you may be my witness that I dug this well." <sup>31</sup>This is why the place is called Beer-sheba; the two of them took an oath there. <sup>32</sup>When they had thus made the covenant in Beer-sheba, Abimelech, along with Phicol, the commander of his army, left to return to the land of the Philistines.

<sup>33</sup>Abraham planted a tamarisk at Beer-sheba, and there he invoked by name the LORD, God the Eternal. <sup>34</sup>Abraham resided in the land of the Philistines for a long time.

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## CHAPTER 22

### *The Testing of Abraham*

<sup>1</sup>Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test and said to him: Abraham! “Here I am!” he replied. <sup>2</sup>Then God said: Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There offer him up as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you. <sup>3</sup>Early the next morning Abraham saddled his donkey, took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac, and after cutting the wood for the burnt offering, set out for the place of which God had told him.

<sup>4</sup>On the third day Abraham caught sight of the place from a distance. <sup>5</sup>Abraham said to his servants: “Stay here with the donkey, while the boy and I go on over there. We will worship and then come back to you.” <sup>6</sup>So Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, while he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two walked on together, <sup>7</sup>Isaac spoke to his father Abraham. “Father!” he said. “Here I am,” he replied. Isaac continued, “Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” <sup>8</sup>“My son,” Abraham answered, “God will provide the sheep for the burnt offering.” Then the two walked on together.

<sup>9</sup>When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. Next he bound his son Isaac, and put him on top of the wood on the altar. <sup>10</sup>Then Abraham reached out and took the knife to slaughter his son. <sup>11</sup>But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, “Abraham, Abraham!” “Here I am,” he answered. <sup>12</sup>“Do not lay your hand on the boy,” said the angel. “Do not do the least thing to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you did not withhold from me your son, your only one.” <sup>13</sup>Abraham looked up and saw a single ram caught by its horns in the thicket. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son.

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After all the promises of a son, and all the times the promise was jeopardized before Isaac was finally born, now, before giving the command to Abraham, God highlights how precious Isaac is to Abraham by describing his uniqueness in three phrases of increasing intensity. Only then does God give the command to sacrifice Isaac in the land of Moriah, a place that cannot be located today. Second Chronicles 3:1 refers to Mount Moriah as the location of the Jerusalem temple, establishing a connection between the test of Abraham and the offering of sacrifices in the temple. Today the Muslim Dome of the Rock stands over the rock that tradition identifies as the place of Abraham’s sacrifice.

The pace of the narrative resembles that of chapter 21: it gives measured details of Abraham’s preparations, prolonging the suspense for both Abraham and Isaac, and also for the reader. We wonder how God can possibly ask this ultimate sacrifice of Abraham after all the years of promises that culminate in the gift of laughter that Isaac brings to his aged parents. The chapter continues the theme of jeopardy to the promise that permeates the entire Abraham narrative even after Isaac’s birth, as we saw in chapter 21. But this time it is the Lord, who made the promise of children to Abraham and repeated it over and over again throughout many threats to its fulfillment, who seems to jeopardize the promise. In the previous chapter, Abraham hesitates to banish his son Ishmael, but God insists; now Abraham has only Isaac, and God directs him to sacrifice that one whom he loves. This is to be a burnt offering, or holocaust. The expression appears six times in this chapter, highlighting its importance. In the time of Abraham it was the father who offered the sacrifice; after the temple was built and worship was institutionalized, the requirements stipulated that the offering was to be an animal without blemish, and that the priest would burn the entire offering at the temple (see Lev 1:3-17).

These details about the divine command suggest that the episode became part of the nar-



rative late in the monarchy, when political and military events were testing the faith of the entire people. The scope of the divine command grows in horror with each added detail; here we realize that Isaac is a fitting offering because he is unblemished. Abraham's silence after his initial "Here I am!" is typical of his quiet acceptance of divine instructions throughout his life. Here it is all the more poignant in light of the dreadful act he is asked to perform: no words can adequately respond to this divine command. Just as God heard the cry of Ishmael in 21:17, Abraham hears Isaac's cry in 22:7; he responds "Here I am" a second time. Isaac's question about the sacrificial animal indicates that he, too, expects a holocaust, but does not at all envision himself as the actual sacrificial victim. In 21:17 God hastens to reassure Hagar; here in 22:8 Abraham reassures Isaac that God will provide.

The narrative continues at its infinitely slow pace, recounting the details of preparing the sacrifice with Isaac on top of the firewood. The matter is almost too much to bear. Not until Abraham holds the knife above his son does the angel stop his hand from performing the sacrifice and announce that Abraham has passed the test. The expression "fear of God" connotes awe, reverence, and obedience. After Abraham completes the sacrifice by offering a ram, the messenger repeats the divine promise of offspring, this time relating it to Abraham's obedience to God. After that the scene ends with the ambiguous note that they return home; even the narrator is too exhausted to specify who: only the servants? Isaac?

There is no mention of Sarah in this story. We can only wonder about her reaction to the entire affair. In his tapestry that hangs in the foyer of the Knesset, or Parliament, building in Jerusalem, Marc Chagall depicted Sarah present at the sacrifice. Her presence in the tapestry expresses her agonized love for the son who brought laughter to her, and also intensifies the pain in the event: what mother could bear to watch her child become a sacrificial lamb?

The narrative explains that this is a test of Abraham's faithfulness, and that he passes it

<sup>14</sup>Abraham named that place Yahweh-yireh; hence people today say, "On the mountain the LORD will provide."

<sup>15</sup>A second time the angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven <sup>16</sup>and said: "I swear by my very self—oracle of the LORD—that because you acted as you did in not withholding from me your son, your only one, <sup>17</sup>I will bless you and make your descendants as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore; your descendants will take possession of the gates of their enemies, <sup>18</sup>and in your descendants all the nations of the earth will find blessing, because you obeyed my command."

<sup>19</sup>Abraham then returned to his servants, and they set out together for Beer-sheba, where Abraham lived.

#### *Nahor's Descendants*

<sup>20</sup>Some time afterward, the news came to Abraham: "Milcah too has borne sons to your brother Nahor: <sup>21</sup>Uz, his firstborn, his brother Buz, Kemuel the father of Aram, <sup>22</sup>Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel." <sup>23</sup>Bethuel became the father of Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother. <sup>24</sup>His concubine, whose name was Reumah, also bore children: Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah.

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with flying colors. But the portrayal of Abraham the father is problematic. In previous episodes, he pleads with God on behalf of others. He begs God not to destroy the city of Sodom if a few righteous people can be found there (18:22-32). He objects when Sarah wants Hagar and Ishmael banished (21:11). But here, when God asks him to kill his only son Isaac, the son who has been promised repeatedly, the son whom he loves, Abraham's only response is "hinneni."

A brief genealogical note follows, informing Abraham and the reader that Abraham's brother Nahor has twelve sons including one



## CHAPTER 23

### *Purchase of a Burial Plot*

<sup>1</sup>The span of Sarah's life was one hundred and twenty-seven years. <sup>2</sup>She died in Kiriath-arba—now Hebron—in the land of Canaan, and Abraham proceeded to mourn and weep for her. <sup>3</sup>Then he left the side of his deceased wife and addressed the Hittites: <sup>4</sup>"Although I am a resident alien among you, sell me from your holdings a burial place, that I may bury my deceased wife." <sup>5</sup>The Hittites answered Abraham: "Please, <sup>6</sup>sir, listen to us! You are a mighty leader among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our burial sites. None of us would deny you his burial ground for the burial of your dead." <sup>7</sup>Abraham, however, proceeded to bow low before the people of the land, the Hittites, <sup>8</sup>and said to them: "If you will allow me room for burial of my dead, listen to me! Intercede for me with Ephron, son of Zohar, <sup>9</sup>so that he will sell me the cave of Machpelah that he owns; it is at the edge of his field. Let him sell it to me in your presence at its full price for a burial place."

<sup>10</sup>Now Ephron was sitting with the Hittites. So Ephron the Hittite replied to Abraham in the hearing of the Hittites, all who entered the gate of his city: <sup>11</sup>"Please, sir, listen to me! I give you both the field and the cave in it; in the presence of my people I give it to you. Bury your dead!" <sup>12</sup>But Abraham, after bowing low before the people of the land, <sup>13</sup>addressed Ephron in the hearing of these men: "If only you would please listen to me! I will pay you the price of the field. Accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there." <sup>14</sup>Ephron replied to Abraham, "Please, <sup>15</sup>sir, listen to me! A piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver—what is that between you and me? Bury your dead!" <sup>16</sup>Abraham accepted Ephron's terms; he weighed out to him the silver that Ephron had stipulated in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver at the current market value.

<sup>17</sup>Thus Ephron's field in Machpelah, facing Mamre, together with its cave and all the trees

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named Bethuel, the father of Rebekah. This information foreshadows future generations of Abraham's family: Isaac will eventually marry Rebekah, and Isaac's son Jacob will marry Rebekah's nieces and will father twelve sons and one daughter.

### **23:1-20 Sarah's death and burial**

Now that Abraham has passed his final test he spends his remaining days settling his affairs: purchasing a burial plot for his wife Sarah, securing a wife for his son Isaac, and distributing his assets before his own death. Verses 1-2 provide the background information in the style of P, the probable source for the episode. In verses 3-18 Abraham negotiates the purchase of land for a burial site. The negotiations proceed in stages: first, as a sojourner in the land, he petitions the local people for a burial place. They respond favorably and respectfully, inviting him to select the piece of land he prefers (vv. 3-6). In verses 4-15 the expression "bury your/my dead" appears seven times, always with a possessive word that expresses relationship, love, and respect and highlights the purpose of Abraham's request. In verses 7-11 he designates the cave he would like, and asks the council to make his request to the owner of the plot, according to the custom. The owner offers to give the cave and its surrounding field to Abraham.

We learn in verses 12-18 that Abraham prefers to buy the land, and weighs out the stipulated price. His request to purchase the property raises two difficulties: first, he is an alien and is normally not entitled to buy land (Lev 25:23); and second, landowners are very reluctant to give up their land (1 Kgs 21:3). These negotiations take place in the presence of witnesses because it is an oral, rather than written, agreement.

The process of acquiring land for burial resonated with the people during the exile in Babylon, when they were without land to call their own. The P editors incorporated that concern into the ancestral story in such a way that the episode fits both the ancestral narrative and the exilic loss of land.

**24:1-67 A wife for Isaac**

One more task remains for Abraham in order to assure the continuation of the divine promise of progeny to him and Sarah: that is to find a wife for Isaac from among his own people. The text does not include Isaac in these arrangements; after the heart-stopping account of his near-death experience, there is no further record of interaction between father and son. The episode revolves around Abraham's servant, whom Abraham sends to his people in Haran. The importance of both family ties and land is highlighted in the servant's question as to whether to take Isaac back to that land if the chosen woman refuses to accompany the servant back to Canaan. Abraham's emphatic response assures the servant that the Lord will find him a wife. The servant's gesture in verse 9 (putting his hand under the thigh of his master) relates to an ancient custom of swearing by the genitals in acknowledgment of their sacred importance for passing life along to the next generation. (The thigh is a euphemism for genitals.) A further consideration is the need for Isaac to remain in Canaan because he embodies the divine promises of descendants and land. Later the Lord instructs him not to leave the land, even in time of famine (Gen 26:2).

Abraham's wealth and his eagerness to make a good impression on his relatives are evident in the sizeable gift the servant takes with him as a bride-price. The journey is surely lengthy, given the distance involved and the number of cattle in the servant's care; but the narrative skips over any mention of the trip, and focuses immediately on the scene at the well.

This story is an example of another kind of type scene: the betrothal. The type involves a man traveling to foreign territory to find a wife for himself or someone else. Once there he goes to a well and meets young women of the area. Someone provides water from the well for the visitor and for the animals gathered there. Then the girls return home to announce the visitor's presence. He receives an invitation to their home, and a betrothal follows. This scene appears here and also in Genesis 29, when

anywhere within its limits, was conveyed <sup>18</sup>to Abraham by purchase in the presence of the Hittites, all who entered the gate of Ephron's city. <sup>19</sup>After this, Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave of the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre—now Hebron—in the land of Canaan. <sup>20</sup>Thus the field with its cave was transferred from the Hittites to Abraham as a burial place.

**CHAPTER 24***Isaac and Rebekah*

<sup>1</sup>Abraham was old, having seen many days, and the LORD had blessed him in every way. <sup>2</sup>Abraham said to the senior servant of his household, who had charge of all his possessions: "Put your hand under my thigh, <sup>3</sup>and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I live, <sup>4</sup>but that you will go to my own land and to my relatives to get a wife for my son Isaac." <sup>5</sup>The servant asked him: "What if the woman is unwilling to follow me to this land? Should I then take your son back to the land from which you came?" <sup>6</sup>Abraham told him, "Never take my son back there for any reason! <sup>7</sup>The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and the land of my relatives, and who confirmed by oath the promise he made to me, 'I will give this land to your descendants'—he will send his angel before you, and you will get a wife for my son there. <sup>8</sup>If the woman is unwilling to follow you, you will be released from this oath to me. But never take my son back there!" <sup>9</sup>So the servant put his hand under the thigh of his master Abraham and swore to him concerning this matter.

<sup>10</sup>The servant then took ten of his master's camels, and bearing all kinds of gifts from his master, he made his way to the city of Nahor in Aram Naharaim. <sup>11</sup>Near evening, at the time when women go out to draw water, he made the camels kneel by the well outside the city. <sup>12</sup>Then he said: "LORD, God of my master Abraham, let

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it turn out favorably for me today and thus deal graciously with my master Abraham. <sup>13</sup>While I stand here at the spring and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water, <sup>14</sup>if I say to a young woman, 'Please lower your jug, that I may drink,' and she answers, 'Drink, and I will water your camels, too,' then she is the one whom you have decided upon for your servant Isaac. In this way I will know that you have dealt graciously with my master."

<sup>15</sup>He had scarcely finished speaking when Rebekah—who was born to Bethuel, son of Milcah, the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor—came out with a jug on her shoulder. <sup>16</sup>The young woman was very beautiful, a virgin, untouched by man. She went down to the spring and filled her jug. As she came up, <sup>17</sup>the servant ran toward her and said, "Please give me a sip of water from your jug." <sup>18</sup>"Drink, sir," she replied, and quickly lowering the jug into her hand, she gave him a drink. <sup>19</sup>When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, "I will draw water for your camels, too, until they have finished drinking." <sup>20</sup>With that, she quickly emptied her jug into the drinking trough and ran back to the well to draw more water, until she had drawn enough for all the camels. <sup>21</sup>The man watched her the whole time, silently waiting to learn whether or not the LORD had made his journey successful. <sup>22</sup>When the camels had finished drinking, the man took out a gold nose-ring weighing half a shekel, and two gold bracelets weighing ten shekels for her wrists. <sup>23</sup>Then he asked her: "Whose daughter are you? Tell me, please. And is there a place in your father's house for us to spend the night?" <sup>24</sup>She answered: "I am the daughter of Bethuel the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor. <sup>25</sup>We have plenty of straw and fodder," she added, "and also a place to spend the night." <sup>26</sup>The man then knelt and bowed down to the LORD, <sup>27</sup>saying: "Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not let his kindness and fidelity toward my master fail. As for me, the LORD has led me straight to the house of my master's brother."

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Jacob is looking for a wife. The type scene appears again in abbreviated form in Exodus 2:15-22, when Moses takes a wife after fleeing from Egypt.

Here, in accordance with the type scene, the servant goes to the well at the time when the women come to get water for the evening meal. The servant prays to God, then sets up the scenario by which he will know whom to request as a wife for his master. It is a simple device: he will ask for a drink of water, and if a young woman agrees to give water not only to him but also to his camels, he will know she is the one he seeks. The narrator tells the reader that Rebekah is the granddaughter of Abraham's brother Nahor, and thus Abraham's grand-niece, but the servant does not yet know this.

The particulars give the story its unique character. The text describes Rebekah in an unusual amount of detail. Specifically, we learn that she is a very beautiful virgin, an ideal choice for a wife for Isaac. The type scene continues when the servant poses his question and Rebekah responds, giving him water and then making several trips back and forth to water the ten camels as well. These details depict Rebekah as energetic, industrious, and generous, further augmenting her desirability as a wife for Isaac. The servant's two questions remind us that he still does not know who she is until she unwittingly identifies herself as a member of Abraham's family. The type scene continues as the girl rushes home to announce the servant's coming while the servant prays in thanksgiving to God for leading him there.

In keeping with nomadic hospitality, Rebekah's brother Laban rushes out to the servant and invites him to his home. The servant insists on telling his story, explaining why he has come and reminding the reader that the Lord is guiding the events that take place. The family members readily agree to the servant's request that Rebekah return with him to become Isaac's wife because they recognize that the request is from the Lord. Their statement, "Here is Rebekah, right in front of you; take her and go" in verse 51 is the formal ratification of the betrothal. The Hebrew formula includes

the word *hinneh* that we met in chapter 22 and that connotes attentiveness, readiness, and willingness.

The next morning, in verse 54, her family suggests that the party stay awhile before leaving, in keeping with customs of hospitality. But the servant is eager to return to Abraham and report the successful outcome of his trip. The family members ask Rebekah's consent to the arrangement. This is a necessary step in ancient Near Eastern societies, because the betrothal involves two special circumstances: the marriage is arranged by her brother rather than her father, and it will take her away from her homeland. As soon as she gives her consent the family members send her and her nurse with the servant and all his retinue. The fact that her nurse accompanies her suggests that Rebekah is still quite young at the time of the betrothal. Her family members bless her with the hope of many descendants as well as victory over enemies. (See Ruth 4:11 for a similar blessing.)

In verse 62 Isaac reappears in the story for the first time since his near-sacrifice. We learn that he is living in the Negeb, and that one day in the late afternoon he sees the approaching caravan. The Hebrew text is not clear here, so we do not know whether he has been expecting them. The narrative switches immediately to Rebekah, who looks up at the same time and sees Isaac. The simple description of their meeting is anticlimactic after the lengthy account of the servant's journey to find Rebekah and bring her home with him. Rebekah veils herself for their meeting, signaling to Isaac that she has come to marry him.

The servant's response, "That is my master," is puzzling here, as his master is actually Abraham, but the person in front of them is Isaac. It is possible that Abraham has died by the time the party returns. That would explain the servant's comment in verse 36 that Abraham has given everything he owns to his son Isaac, and also the note that the servant reports on his journey to Isaac (v. 66). Abraham's death is actually announced in chapter 25, immediately after the finding of a wife for Isaac, perhaps so as not to interrupt the flow of events

<sup>28</sup>Then the young woman ran off and told her mother's household what had happened. <sup>29</sup>Now Rebekah had a brother named Laban. Laban rushed outside to the man at the spring. <sup>30</sup>When he saw the nose-ring and the bracelets on his sister's arms and when he heard Rebekah repeating what the man had said to her, he went to him while he was standing by the camels at the spring. <sup>31</sup>He said: "Come, blessed of the LORD! Why are you standing outside when I have made the house ready, as well as a place for the camels?" <sup>32</sup>The man then went inside; and while the camels were being unloaded and provided with straw and fodder, water was brought to bathe his feet and the feet of the men who were with him. <sup>33</sup>But when food was set before him, he said, "I will not eat until I have told my story." "Go ahead," they replied.

<sup>34</sup>"I am Abraham's servant," he began. <sup>35</sup>"The LORD has blessed my master so abundantly that he has become wealthy; he has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female slaves, and camels and donkeys. <sup>36</sup>My master's wife Sarah bore a son to my master in her old age, and he has given him everything he owns. <sup>37</sup>My master put me under oath, saying: 'You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites in whose land I live; <sup>38</sup>instead, you must go to my father's house, to my own family, to get a wife for my son.' <sup>39</sup>When I asked my master, 'What if the woman will not follow me?' <sup>40</sup>he replied: 'The LORD, in whose presence I have always walked, will send his angel with you and make your journey successful, and so you will get a wife for my son from my own family and my father's house. <sup>41</sup>Then you will be freed from my curse. If you go to my family and they refuse you, then, too, you will be free from my curse.'

<sup>42</sup>"When I came to the spring today, I said: 'LORD, God of my master Abraham, please make successful the journey I am on. <sup>43</sup>While I stand here at the spring, if I say to a young woman who comes out to draw water, 'Please give me a little water from your jug,' <sup>44</sup>and she answers, 'Drink, and I will draw water for your camels, too—then

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she is the woman whom the LORD has decided upon for my master’s son.’

<sup>45</sup>“I had scarcely finished saying this to myself when Rebekah came out with a jug on her shoulder. After she went down to the spring and drew water, I said to her, ‘Please let me have a drink.’ <sup>46</sup>She quickly lowered the jug she was carrying and said, ‘Drink, and I will water your camels, too.’ So I drank, and she watered the camels also. <sup>47</sup>When I asked her, ‘Whose daughter are you?’ she answered, ‘The daughter of Bethuel, son of Nahor, borne to Nahor by Milcah.’ So I put the ring on her nose and the bracelets on her wrists. <sup>48</sup>Then I knelt and bowed down to the LORD, blessing the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who had led me on the right road to obtain the daughter of my master’s kinsman for his son. <sup>49</sup>Now, if you will act with kindness and fidelity toward my master, let me know; but if not, let me know that too. I can then proceed accordingly.”

<sup>50</sup>Laban and Bethuel said in reply: “This thing comes from the LORD; we can say nothing to you either for or against it. <sup>51</sup>Here is Rebekah, right in front of you; take her and go, that she may become the wife of your master’s son, as the LORD has said.” <sup>52</sup>When Abraham’s servant heard their answer, he bowed to the ground before the LORD. <sup>53</sup>Then he brought out objects of silver and gold and clothing and presented them to Rebekah; he also gave costly presents to her brother and mother. <sup>54</sup>After he and the men with him had eaten and drunk, they spent the night there.

When they got up the next morning, he said, “Allow me to return to my master.” <sup>55</sup>Her brother and mother replied, “Let the young woman stay with us a short while, say ten days; after that she may go.” <sup>56</sup>But he said to them, “Do not detain me, now that the LORD has made my journey successful; let me go back to my master.” <sup>57</sup>They answered, “Let us call the young woman and see

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Many stories of **betrothal** in the Old Testament contain the same key elements.

	Isaac and Rebekah Gen 24:1-67	Jacob and Rachel Gen 29:1-30	Moses and Zipporah Exod 2:15-22
Arrival of stranger	24:10-14	29:1	2:15
Well	24:15-16	29:2	2:16
Young woman	24:11	29:6, 9	2:16
Drawing water	24:16-20	29:10	2:17
Haste	24:17-18, 20, 28, 30, 33, 55-56	29:10-13	2:20
Invitation to meal	24:33		
Marriage	24:67	29:21-30	2:21



in chapter 24. The touching note that Rebekah is a comfort to Isaac after his mother Sarah's death suggests that Isaac misses her keenly.

### 25:1-18 Abraham's death and burial

Chapter 25 begins with a genealogical summary of Abraham's descendants through his second wife Keturah. It specifies that Isaac receives his entire inheritance (see 24:36); but Abraham made settlements with his other sons, and sent them away to the east. This arrangement honors his relationship with all his sons, and at the same time protects the divine promises and the special status of his son Isaac who will carry the promise into the next generation.

Abraham dies, having left all his affairs in order. His sons Isaac and Ishmael bury him next to his wife Sarah. Another genealogical note lists the twelve sons of Ishmael, who become tribal chieftains. The narrative then records Ishmael's death, and gives the extent of the territory in which his descendants live in fulfillment of the promise in 21:13. This section brings to a conclusion the account of Abraham's and Ishmael's lives. It now picks up the thread of Isaac's life at the point of his marriage to Rebekah and the beginning of a new generation who will carry forward the divine promises of descendants and land.

what she herself has to say about it." <sup>58</sup>So they called Rebekah and asked her, "Will you go with this man?" She answered, "I will." <sup>59</sup>At this they sent off their sister Rebekah and her nurse with Abraham's servant and his men. <sup>60</sup>They blessed Rebekah and said:

"Sister, may you grow  
into thousands of myriads;  
And may your descendants gain possession  
of the gates of their enemies!"

<sup>61</sup>Then Rebekah and her attendants started out; they mounted the camels and followed the man. So the servant took Rebekah and went on his way.

<sup>62</sup>Meanwhile Isaac had gone from Beer-lahai-roi and was living in the region of the Negeb.

<sup>63</sup>One day toward evening he went out to walk in the field, and caught sight of camels approaching.

<sup>64</sup>Rebekah, too, caught sight of Isaac, and got down from her camel. <sup>65</sup>She asked the servant, "Who is the man over there, walking through the fields toward us?" "That is my master," replied the servant. Then she took her veil and covered herself.

<sup>66</sup>The servant recounted to Isaac all the things he had done. <sup>67</sup>Then Isaac brought Rebekah into the tent of his mother Sarah. He took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her and found solace after the death of his mother.

## CHAPTER 25

### *Abraham's Sons by Keturah*

<sup>1</sup>Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. <sup>2</sup>She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. <sup>3</sup>Jokshan became the father of Sheba and Dedan. The descendants of Dedan were the Asshurim, the Letushim, and the Leummim. <sup>4</sup>The descendants of Midian were Ephah, Epher, Hanoah, Abida, and Eldaah. All of these were descendants of Keturah.

<sup>5</sup>Abraham gave everything that he owned to his son Isaac. <sup>6</sup>To the sons of his concubines,

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however, he gave gifts while he was still living, as he sent them away eastward, to the land of Kedem, away from his son Isaac.

#### ***Death of Abraham***

<sup>7</sup>The whole span of Abraham's life was one hundred and seventy-five years. <sup>8</sup>Then he breathed his last, dying at a ripe old age, grown old after a full life; and he was gathered to his people. <sup>9</sup>His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron, son of Zohar the Hittite, which faces Mamre, <sup>10</sup>the field that Abraham had bought from the Hittites; there he was buried next to his wife Sarah. <sup>11</sup>After the death of Abraham, God blessed his son Isaac, who lived near Beer-lahai-roi.

#### ***Descendants of Ishmael***

<sup>12</sup>These are the descendants of Abraham's son Ishmael, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's slave, bore to Abraham. <sup>13</sup>These are the names of Ishmael's sons, listed in the order of their birth: Ishmael's firstborn Nebaioth, Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, <sup>14</sup>Mishma, Dumah, Massa, <sup>15</sup>Hadad, Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah. <sup>16</sup>These are the sons of Ishmael, their names by their villages and encampments; twelve chieftains of as many tribal groups.

<sup>17</sup>The span of Ishmael's life was one hundred and thirty-seven years. After he had breathed his last and died, he was gathered to his people. <sup>18</sup>The Ishmaelites ranged from Havilah, by Shur, which is on the border of Egypt, all the way to Asshur; and they pitched camp alongside their various kindred.

**EXPLORING LESSON FIVE**

1. How does Sarah's laughter at Isaac's birth (21:6) differ from her laughter at the promise of his birth (18:9-12)?

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2. Why does Abraham drive out Hagar and Ishmael (21:9-13)? And how does God respond?

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3. How has Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac (22:1-18) been literally and figuratively used in the New Testament? (See Heb 11:19-20; James 2:21; John 19:17 [Gen 22:6].)

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4. a) What paradox would God's command to sacrifice Isaac pose to Abraham (22:2)? (See 21:12; Heb 11:17-19.)

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b) What questions arise in your mind as you think about God testing Abraham in this way?

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5. Today, the cave of Machpelah (23:17-20) draws thousands of pilgrims yearly. Whose memory has made a grave or memorial site of special importance to you?

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*Lesson Five*

6. Recall the events of Sarah’s life. What do you see as her strongest characteristics as a woman of faith?

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7. What are Abraham’s motives in not letting Isaac marry someone in the country where they live (Canaan), but also refusing the possibility that Isaac might go to Abraham’s old homeland to marry (24:1-7)?

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8. As you contemplate the account of how Rebekah became Isaac’s wife (Gen 24:1-67), recall a courtship story that is legendary in your extended family or circle of friends.

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9. What does Ishmael’s genealogy (25:12-18) say about the divine promises made in his regard to Abraham (21:13) and Hagar (21:17-18)?

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10. What have you struggled with in your prayerful study of Genesis 1:1–25:18? What theme or new information has been most valuable to you?

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## CLOSING PRAYER

### Prayer

*Then [Abraham] breathed his last, dying at a ripe old age, grown old after a full life; and he was gathered to his people. (Gen 25:8)*

Abraham put his trust in you, O God, even as he sometimes wavered or tried to control situations beyond his power. Even after he breathed his last he remained part of his people, your people. For those who have died or are nearing the end of this life, we pray, especially for

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## PRAYING WITH YOUR GROUP

Because we know that the Bible allows us to hear God's voice, prayer provides the context for our study and sharing. By speaking and listening to God and each other, the discussion often grows to more deeply bond us to one another and to God.

*At the beginning and end of each lesson* simple prayers are provided for individual use, and also may be used within the group setting. Most of the closing prayers provided with each lesson relate directly to a theme from that lesson and encourage you to pray together for people and events in your local community.

Of course, there are many ways to center ourselves in God's presence as we gather together in groups around the word of God. We provide some additional suggestions here knowing you and your group will make prayer a priority as part of your gathering. These are simply alternative ways to pray if your group would like to try something different from those prayers provided in the previous pages.

### *Conversational Prayer*

This form of prayer allows for the group members to pray in their own words in a way that is not intimidating. The group leader begins with Step One, inviting all to focus on the presence of Christ among them. After a few moments of quiet, the group leader invites anyone in the group to voice a prayer or two of thanksgiving; once that is complete, then anyone who has personal intentions may pray in their own words for their needs; finally, the group prays for the needs of others.

A suggested process:

In your own words, speak simple and short prayers to allow time for others to add their voices.

Focus on one "step" at a time, not worrying about praying for everything in your mental list at once.

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| Step One   | Visualize Christ. Welcome him.<br>Imagine him present with you in your group.<br>Allow time for some silence.               |
| Step Two   | Gratitude opens our hearts.<br>Use simple words such as, "Thank you, Lord,<br>for . . ."                                    |
| Step Three | Pray for your own needs knowing that others<br>will pray with you.<br>Be specific and honest.<br>Use "I" and "me" language. |

#### Step Four

Pray for others by name, with love.  
You may voice your agreement (“Yes, Lord”).  
End with gratitude for sharing concerns.

#### *Praying Like Ignatius*

St. Ignatius Loyola, whose life and ministry is the foundation of the Jesuit community, invites us to enter into Scripture texts in order to experience the scenes, especially scenes of the gospels or other narrative parts of Scripture. Simply put, this is a method of creatively imagining the scene, viewing it from the inside, and asking God to meet you there. Most often, this is a personal form of prayer but in a group setting, some of its elements can be helpful if you allow time for this process.

A suggested process:

- Select a scene from the chapters in the particular lesson.
- Read that scene out loud in the group, followed by some quiet time.
- Ask group members to place themselves in the scene (as a character, or as an onlooker) so that they can imagine the emotions, responses, and thinking that may have taken place. Notice the details and the tone, and imagine the interaction with the Lord that is taking place.
- Share with the group any insights that came to you in this quiet imagining.
- Allow each person in the group to thank God for some insight and to pray about some request that may have surfaced.

#### *Sacred Reading (or Lectio Divina)*

This method of prayer invites us to “listen with the ear of the heart” as St. Benedict’s rule would say. We listen to the words and the phrasing, asking God to speak to our innermost being. Again, this method of prayer is most often used in an individual setting but may also be used in an adapted way within a group..

A suggested process:

- Select a scene from the chapters in the particular lesson.
- Read the scene out loud in the group, perhaps two times.
- Ask group members to ponder a word or phrase that stands out to them.
- The group members could then simply speak the word or phrase as a kind of litany of what was meaningful for your group.
- Allow time for more silence to ponder the words that were heard, asking God to reveal to you what message you are meant to hear, how God is speaking to you.
- Follow up with spoken intentions at the close of this group time.

## REFLECTING ON SCRIPTURE

Reading Scripture is an opportunity not simply to learn new information but to listen to God who loves you. Pray that the same Holy Spirit who guided the formation of Scripture will inspire you to correctly understand what you read, and empower you to make what you read a part of your life.

The inspired word of God contains layers of meaning. As you make your way through passages of Scripture, whether studying a book of the Bible or focusing on a biblical theme, you may find it helpful to ask yourself these four questions:

*What does the Scripture passage say?*

Read the passage slowly and reflectively. Become familiar with it. If the passage you are reading is a narrative, carefully observe the characters and the plot. Use your imagination to picture the scene or enter into it.

*What does the Scripture passage mean?*

Read the footnotes in your Bible and the commentary provided to help you understand what the sacred writers intended and what God wants to communicate by means of their words.

*What does the Scripture passage mean to me?*

Meditate on the passage. God's word is living and powerful. What is God saying to you? How does the Scripture passage apply to your life today?

*What am I going to do about it?*

Try to discover how God may be challenging you in this passage. An encounter with God contains a challenge to know God's will and follow it more closely in daily life. Ask the Holy Spirit to inspire not only your mind but your life with this living word.