PARALLEL GUIDE 8
The Abraham Saga (Part One)

Summary: Second only to the Exodus in its import for the Jewish people, the saga of Abraham covers nearly a third of the Book of Genesis. This chapter looks at other writings from the time of Abraham to illuminate the cultural accuracy of the biblical stories. Then it begins a thematic study of Genesis.

Learning Objectives

• Read Gen. 12-14, 18:16-33, 19:1-11, 19:12-26, and 19:27-39

• State the relationship of the Abraham saga to Gen. 1-11

• State the cost to Abraham due to his call from God

• Contrast the basis for redemption in the covenant with Abraham with the possibilities for human fulfillment found in creation and in the concept of righteousness

• Describe how Abraham changes the notion of community responsibility in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. On a map of this region depicting this epoch, trace the journey of Abraham. Note the important places in the story. What were his important "stepping- stones?"

2. Identify the following: the Tale of Sinuhe, the Mari tablets, the Ras Shamra tablets, the Amarna letters, the Lex Talionis, the Habiru, salvation-history.

3. Develop a chronology of the period in your notebook which parallels events in Egypt and in the life of the patriarchs. This is a good time to develop your own chronology. Different sources will offer different possibilities.

4. In your notebook, write an essay which expresses for you the significance of Abraham's journey in faith. Why is this significant for Jews, Moslems, and Christians?

Preparing for Your Seminar

What are some of the times in your life in which you felt called to leave security behind? How do you respond when the sense of calling is not clear? How important are "guarantees" at such times?

Additional Sources

The first portion of J. Maxwell Miler's article, "Introduction to the History of Ancient Israel," The New Interpreter's Bible, vol. I (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) is useful for this chapter, especially pp. 244-259.

Chapter 8
THE ABRAHAM SAGA (Part One)

We looked at the first eleven chapters of Genesis in great detail, because the issues which are developed there are so important to the rest of our study of the Christian faith. We cannot give such detailed attention to the rest of the Old Testament. The Abraham saga covers fourteen chapters, and we take two chapters to deal with it. You need to pay special attention to the text of the Bible as we go along. To help you keep track of the story of Abraham, we treat it according to its dominant motifs.

1. The call of Abraham—12:1-9.

2. The "deceit motif," in which Abraham lies to save himself—12:10-20, repeated in slightly different form in chapter 20 (and in the Jacob saga, 26:1-11).

3. The Lot motif, in which the relation of Israel to her kindred tribes is described— chapters 13, 14, 18, 19.

4. The covenant, two accounts—chapters 15 and 17.

5. Hagar and Ishmael—chapters 16 and 21:8-21.

6. The Isaac story—21:1-7 and chapters 22 and 24.

7. The cave of Machpelah, where Abraham buys land to bury Sarah—chapter 23.

Before going further, read the Abraham saga* through as one continuous story. Begin with Gen. 11:10-32, which gets us to Abraham, and then read 12:1-25:10, the death of Abraham. You will notice that in the first part of the story Abraham is called Abram. We will discuss the significance of the change of name, but for now realize that Abram and Abraham are the same, and that Sarai and Sarah are the same. At the end of the story of the Tower of Babel the J writer left open the question of God's relationship to creation. Notice that this story is the only account of sin and judgment which in itself contains no note of redemption. After each of the other stories—Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, etc.—we could say that life went on. With the scattering of the people after the confusion of languages at Babel, however, the writer makes no comment to indicate that God's continuing care and protection are in any way present. The Lord scatters the people abroad, and then we have the genealogy of the descendants of Shem.

This must be deliberate on the part of the J writer. The story of Abraham can be seen as the conclusion of the story of the Tower of Babel; here God's continuing grace is asserted. There is also a sense in which all the rest of the Bible is the conclusion of the Tower of Babel story, or better, of the entire first eleven chapters of Genesis. The story of the people of God is the story of God's selecting one particular people to be the means of bringing scattered, alienated, violent, shameful, and fearful humankind back together in peace and fulfillment. For this reason, the history of the people of God is often referred to as "salvation-history." In the next few paragraphs we shall look quickly and sweepingly at some of the features of this "salvation-history."

Israel the Elect

From among all the peoples of the earth—and remember that the first eleven chapters deal with humankind in general—one man and woman are selected by God to be the parents of a particular nation. This is to be the nation of Israel. Israel is then chosen, or elected, by God in order to be a blessing to all the nations. This is the solution to the unresolved problem in chapter 11. There, people tried to make their own society by which security and fulfillment could be grasped. God will make a people from whom true security and the fulfillment of God's purposes will come.

As the history of Israel unfolds, we are shown with great honesty the many failures of this people to keep faith with their calling. At the same time we also see God's faithfulness to God's purpose. In the New Testament we see that the election of Israel narrows even more to one man—Jesus—and from Jesus flows the covenant that reaches to all nations. The Christian church is not to be just one organization among many, but the "new Israel," extending itself to all the nations. This is the meaning of the word "catholic" as used for the church: it is universal, for all people in all times and places. It has not yet reached that goal; of itself, it never will. Christians expect God through Jesus to bring all nations into God's fold in the "kingdom."

The notions of election and of God's grace are basic to the biblical answer to the problems of human sin. Creation in the image of God is not enough to enable humankind to reach fulfillment—sin has entered the picture. The righteousness of Noah was not enough, either. The evil in the human heart still continues. Personal righteousness is not sufficient. Only God's grace which calls or elects (the words mean the same) us is the key to the redemption which God intends. Faith, or a "Yes" to God's call, is what counts as an adequate response to God, rather than total righteousness.

Salvation-History*

This salvation-history, the story of call and response, of election and faith, begins with Abraham. Abraham is the ideal model to which Israel has looked to understand her own calling, and he remains the model for the Christian church. Abraham is a good example precisely because he is far from our usual [mis]understanding of "saints" as people who are perfect. Abraham is far from perfect, but despite his mistakes and his sins, he never abandons the Lord.

In Gen. 12 we begin to read the story of Israel, but we are not yet dealing with what we would call "history." We have met the notion of myth—stories which are "true" because they describe the terms of existence at all times and places, not because they tell us "what really happened." In the Abraham saga and through the rest of Genesis, we read stories about the patriarchs, the fathers, of Israel. Do these stories tell "what really happened"? Were there really men called Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph?

There is no question that the events described in these stories are important for an understanding of Israel, but it is also clear that they are not dependable as accurate accounts. In their details, they do not make reliable history according to our present understanding of history. As descriptions of life in the times, however, their accuracy is borne out by studies of other writings from about the same time. We know from certain documents that life in the ancient Near East was frequently semi-nomadic,

that there were people who moved with their flocks but also had certain tracts of land which they planted and to which they returned at harvest time. The kinds of cultic sacrifices Genesis describes are also described in other documents. We even have records of a people, called the Habiru, who were a kind of riffraff who kept harassing Canaan at about the time the Bible speaks of the Israelite invasion of that land.

The Tale of Sinuhe*

The Tale of Sinuhe, from around 1900 BCE, tells of an Egyptian named Sinuhe who was forced to flee from Egypt because of some involvement in court intrigue and who took refuge with an Amorite chieftain. The Amorites lived in the north central part of Palestine. The tale describes life in this area in a way that is very similar to what we find in the Genesis accounts. Semi-nomads, with herds of sheep and goats, stay in pasture areas for some length of time, making treaties with their agricultural neighbors—sometimes planting crops themselves to which they will return at harvest time—but eventually moving on to new grazing lands. They are not nomads such as those who roamed the deserts from oasis to oasis, always on the move and never

associated very closely with agricultural peoples. These semi-nomads are a transitional group between the nomads and the agriculturalists. Such a description in Sinuhe agrees with the descriptions of the patriarchs, showing that the stories in Genesis preserve some accurate memories.

The Ras Shamra Tablets*

The Ras Shamra tablets were discovered in 1928 in the ancient town of Ugarit in southern Asia Minor. Dating from between the 18th and 13th centuries BCE, they are in the language of ancient Canaan. Their descriptions of Canaanite cults and myths and the parallel language forms by which we have come to understand Hebrew words make them invaluable for the study of the Old Testament. They confirm, and sometimes help us to understand, the cultic practices alluded to or described in the Old Testament, and support the essential accuracy of the Hebrew accounts.

The Amarna Letters*

Finally, in Egypt in the 14th century BCE there are the Amarna letters from the archives of Pharaoh Akh-en-Aton. They were sent by semi-independent city-kings in Canaan to their overlord, the pharaoh. Some of them complain about the influx of a group called the Habiru. (The word has been related to the word "Hebrew," but it is not equivalent to it.) These were apparently a rough class of people who came in from the desert areas and plagued the settled communities. The Israelites did not refer among themselves to Habiru or Hebrews; the few times the word is used in the Bible, it is used by a foreigner or by Israelites of themselves when addressing a foreigner. It seems unlikely that the Habiru referred to in the Amarna letters include the incoming Israelites from Egypt after the Exodus. Perhaps Abraham and Jacob were chieftains of later groups to whom certain tribal characteristics have been gradually ascribed.

Thus in the stories of the patriarchs we see documented descriptions of life in their time. Our main concern, however, is neither sociological nor historical; it has to do with the theological notion of the election of Israel, and the patriarchs who demonstrate this election.

Genesis 11:10-26

These verses are a P genealogy, tracing the descendants of Shem. It was from this line that Israel was eventually to come, and the genealogy which P had at hand

comes down to Terah and his three sons, Abram, Nahor, and Haran. The names in the genealogy are names of cities in the area of the migration, so we can assume that there are real tribal memories reflected in it.

Genesis 11:27-12:3

The Call of Abraham

Verses 27-30 give us the names and relationships of the people who are featured in the story: Terah, the father; Abram and his wife, Sarai; and Lot, Abram's nephew. Notice that the writer gives the name of the father of Nahor's wife but not of the father of Sarai, Abram's wife. Is this simply because there was some significance, unknown to us, about that particular man—whose name, Haran, is the same as that of Abram's other brother and also of the city to which they went? Or does this reflect what we find in Gen. 20, in the E document, the possible knowledge that Sarai was Abram's half-sister? If so, J may not want to say so, since their marriage would have been forbidden by later law. Sarai is barren—an important fact for the story that

follows.

Terah takes his family, including Lot, the son of Haran—who has died—and migrates from Ur of the Chaldeans in Mesopotamia to the city of Haran in northern Palestine. Terah dies there, but not until after Abram has received his call.

In 12:1-3, God calls Abram to leave everything behind him* and go to a land that God will show him. Note here how the wording of what he is to leave behind moves from the larger to the smaller unit: his country (the general location), his kindred (the clan), his father's house (the specific unit). To leave the house of one's father before his death was very much against ancient tradition. Not until the father dies and gives his blessing—a kind of will or legacy—does the son leave to establish his own home. The only blessing Abram is to receive is that which YHWH will give him: he is to receive a land (as yet unknown; see 17:8) and children who will become a great nation. These two features, land and posterity, are the essentials of the blessing. We should not "spiritualize" the notion of blessing, which for the Hebrews meant primarily material things. Israel's right to the land of Palestine, which is promised to Abram by YHWH, was to become particularly important in later times. (Note that it is YHWH who will make Abram's name great [12:2b], not Abram himself.)

Notice, however, that the promise is less than completely clear. YHWH gives a blessing, but it is of a land not yet known and of children from a barren wife! The Yahwist writer is stressing the fact that this is not a human possibility. Unlike the human ingenuity and social cooperation on which the builders of the Tower of Babel relied, the promises to Israel through Abram are based solely on the possibility of divine grace. Rather than avoiding anxiety by human inventiveness, Abram is called to respond on the basis of his faith in the divine promise.

The Yahwist also paints a picture of divine grace which is abundant. He says that the people who bless Abram will be blessed by God, but only the person who curses Abram will God curse. There is abundant blessing, but only a limited curse. "By you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves," or "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed," or "in you shall all families . . . find a blessing"—each translation is possible, although the meanings are not exactly the same: Israel, the descendants of Abraham, is called for the purpose of bringing God's blessing to all

nations. Since Abraham and his descendants have this responsibility, we should use the passive form: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." The other options are not wrong grammatically, but they are inadequate to the form of the Hebrew. This blessing-bearing is the messianic purpose of Israel—the nation itself is called to a role that in later ages would be seen as the role of the messiah.

There is probably no single facet of the story of the people of Israel that is more important than this one. Its importance lies in this: the goodness of creation has not been enough to prevent sin, and the righteousness of Noah has not been enough either. The evil imagination of the heart has remained in Noah and his descendants. Now, in this act of God, Abram is to receive a covenant which is to make up for the failure of righteousness. Abram's response, shown in verse 4, is one of faith alone. With no guarantees, in fact in the face of the obvious—for the promise cannot be fulfilled by any human standards of possibility—Abram does as God has called him to do. Throughout Israel's history, as again and again righteousness failed and evil times were seen as divine judgment, the figure of Abraham is recalled to instill new hope in the promises made in a covenant that was based on God's grace, rather than on human sufficiency.

Genesis 12:4-9

Abram's immediate response of faith takes him into the land of Canaan. These verses show Abram coming to

the shrines of the Canaanites and building altars to YHWH. The oak of Moreh was such a shrine, as was the mountain between Bethel and Ai (vv. 6, 8). In calling on the name of YHWH (v. 8), Abram claims these sites for YHWH against Canaanite gods. This is the first example of the opposition between Yahwism and the baalism (fertility worship) of the Canaanites; it will occur again and again. (Biblical commentators up through Luther interpreted this as Abram preaching to the Canaanites, but it is nothing of the sort.)

Genesis 12:10-20
The Deceit Motif

Following his response of faith, Abram is then shown as deceitful. For some commentators it is a mystery why the J writer chose to put this story here; from an examination of the text based on the characteristics of the sources, many scholars are certain that the main story line jumps from 12:9 to 13:2. Yet the J writer inserted this little story here. When a story is not necessary to plot, that may be one indication that it has some other function, such as presenting a theological insight.

The deceit story is told in three places in Genesis—an illustration of the documentary hypothesis. Besides this place, it appears as the whole of chapter 20, and, with Isaac and Rebekah (his wife) as the main characters, in 26:1-11. Turn to these other passages and read them. You may notice that the story is obviously the same, but the level of immorality lessens each time. Here the pharaoh actually takes Sarai as a wife, whereas in the other two this does not happen. But what can the story mean? Abraham, our celebrated ancestor in the faith, goes immediately without question and without argument when God first calls him. Then, when faced with his first difficulty—the drought in the land—does he turn to the Lord for guidance? No, he has the solution himself: go to Egypt. But that leads to a further problem: the Egyptians will kill him in order to get his wife. Again, does he turn to the Lord for instruction? No, once more he comes up with his own solution. In the space of very few

lines, Abraham, who has been promised land and descendants, and been given the responsibility to channel God's blessing to others, has left the land, lost his wife, and caused a plague on the Egyptian court. The Lord still remains faithful instead of abandoning Abraham in search of someone who would be more willing to seek and follow God's instruction.

The pattern of this version of the story (12:10-20) resembles closely the story of the Exodus from Egypt under Moses: there is a migration to Egypt in a time of famine, a position of favor achieved in the court of Pharaoh, a visitation of plagues brought on the house of the pharaoh by YHWH, and a departure laden with wealth from Egypt. In fact, in the Exodus account we see the Egyptians rush out to the departing Hebrews to beg them to take all their household wealth with them, as though in the development of the Exodus story it was recognized that the Israelites should leave with great wealth as Abram had.

Genesis 20:1-17

This version of the story, involving Abimelech instead of the pharaoh, shows a characteristic device of the E writer: God's appearing in a dream to warn Abimelech not to have intercourse with Sarah. Verse 6, in which God says that Abimelech was acting in good faith when he took Sarah, contrasts sharply with verse 11 in which Abraham—the change of his name occurs in 17:5—excuses his action on the ground that he thought that, "There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife." Abimelech seems to be more aware of God than Abraham. Here we have also the tradition that Sarah was in fact Abraham's half-sister (v. 12). Recent archeological evidence has come to light that in some societies a rich man might "adopt" his favorite wife as his sister. E. A. Spiser's commentary on Genesis in the Anchor Bible Series discusses the possibility that what we have here is an ancient memory that Abraham had "adopted" Sarah. Since the custom was unknown in Gerar, Abimelech misinterpreted it to mean Sarah was not married.

Or perhaps Sarah and Abraham were in fact half-siblings. Then the problem is not that Abraham lied, but that he did not tell the whole truth—leaving out the most important part of it, that Sarah was his wife.

Abimelech's graciousness and integrity show Abraham in a rather bad light. The preservation of such a story, uncomplimentary to its Israelite hero, shows the integrity of the oral tradition and the writer's use of it. There is very little "cleaning up" work done. Too, the story is in keeping with the idea that the covenant with Abraham is based on the faith with which he accepted his call, not on his actual righteousness. Abraham repays Abimelech's graciousness by praying to God, so that God removes the barrenness of Abimelech's wife and female servants. In verse 7 Abraham is called a prophet because "he will pray for you, and you shall live." Here is a glimpse of an early understanding of the role of prophet as one who is filled with the power of God and who, in this power, might pray for another and even, perhaps, speak an answer to the prayer in the form of an oracle. Even though the later prophets come to speak the word of YHWH to the people, they continue to pray for them. (Jeremiah, in fact, has to be told by God not to pray for a time.)

Genesis 13:1-13
The Lot Motif

It is somewhat strange that Lot should be with Abram at all, since, as a nephew, he could have been left at Haran with the others of the family. Lot is to be the ancestor of some of the later neighbors of Israel, people to whom Israel knew she was closely related; this story accounts for their kinship, but also casts these neighbors in a bad light, reflecting the tone of the later relationships between the two peoples.

When Abram comes back to Bethel and Ai, where he had earlier built an altar, he is very rich as a result of his stay in Egypt. In the account of the division of the land—a kind of transaction that was often necessary when flocks became too large for the available grazing land—Abram is pictured as going far beyond what could be expected of him. As the elder he would naturally have first choice of land, but he allows Lot this privilege. Lot picks the rich, fertile land to the east in the Jordan valley. We, the readers, are expected to know that this was the land that was later to be blotted out—the site of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Genesis 13:14-18

Immediately after Lot has left, YHWH tells Abram to look in all directions—including that which Lot has just chosen—and (v. 17) to walk throughout the length and breadth of the land. In those days land was taken possession of, according to law, in these two ways. One possessed the land by sight: one met with the landowner to buy some land and, when an agreement was reached, one went to look at the land. When one had looked at the land, the transaction was completed. The other way of taking possession was by pacing off the boundaries, thus making sure that one was getting all the land one had paid for. In this account, at YHWH's command, Abram uses both methods of taking possession. The J writer is showing that, even if the Israelites did not actually take possession of the land until the invasions after the Exodus, it had long been rightfully theirs because YHWH had given it to Abram.

Genesis 14:1-12

This story of war between two groups of kings, which continues through all of chapter 14, is puzzling if you try to follow its details. The geography is confusing and it is difficult to tell who the kings are. The reason why it is included, however, is clear. First, it is very flattering to Abram: he is shown as a man of action defeating the allied kings from the Euphrates with only 318 "trained men." Second, the story shows Jerusalem as a holy city even at the time of Abram.

As nearly as we can surmise from this confusing story, there appears to have been a group of kings in the

area at the southern end of the Dead Sea who were rebelling against the overlordship of the kings from the north, the Tigris-Euphrates area. The details of the geography and the movements of the kings make no sense at all, but the outcome is that the Euphrates kings are successful in putting down the rebellion, and, in the process, take Lot captive. This fact ties the story into the Lot motif.

Genesis 14:13-16

Abram rescues Lot, and is thus seen as the deliverer of Lot and his descendants, so they owe their very existence to Abram. Thus the superiority of Israel over her neighbors to the east across the Jordan is secured.

Genesis 14:18-20

We pass by verse 17, which speaks of the king of Sodom, for we pick him up in verses 21-24. It is another example of the jumbled nature of the text that he should appear here, and then immediately be pushed aside by the figure of Melchizedek, the

king of Salem. Melchizedek, besides being a king, is a priest of "God Most High." In Hebrew this is el ʻelyon, almost certainly a reference to the god of the Jebusites, inhabitants of Jerusalem before the Israelites took over the city under King David. The god of Jerusalem, El Elyon, blesses Abram, and Abram gives a tithe—ten per cent of all he has. Thus Jerusalem becomes a shrine at which Abram has given a tithe, and El Elyon, God Most High, is presented as really the same God as YHWH.

Genesis 14:21-24

Then the king of Sodom—as though all this took place at the same time and at Jerusalem—offers to Abram all the booty of war except the people who had been taken from his area. Abram refuses to take anything, however, and in his refusal he ties together the two names, YHWH and El Elyon, "I have sworn to the LORD (YHWH) God Most High (El Elyon) . . . that I would not take . . . anything that is yours . . ." (vv. 22-23). For Abram the two names represent the same deity.

Melchizedek

The shadowy figure of Melchizedek is referred to in Psalm 110:4, and, with this psalm as its reference, in Hebrews 5:6 in the New Testament. In Psalm 110, Melchizedek is the source of the priesthood of the Davidic king. Before the Exile, the king also carried out some of the functions later thought to belong exclusively to the priesthood. After the Exile, there was no more king and the high priest became, in effect, both priest and king. When the traditions were reworked during and after the Exile, there was an attempt—so far as possible—to deny that any priestly functions were done by the king (though, as we shall see, this was very difficult in the case of Solomon). In the Epistle to the Hebrews, Melchizedek is used as a type of Jesus: he is a priest who comes from the unknown and is not part of any regular priestly line, yet Abram pays a tithe to him. In this way Melchizedek is shown to be greater than Abraham, and his priesthood, the priesthood of Jesus—though he was not of a priestly family—is shown to be superior to the priesthood of Abraham's descendant Levi and, by extension, to the priesthood of the Jerusalem Temple.

Genesis 18:16-33
Sodom and Gomorrah

The Lot motif continues in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, the opening of which is reminiscent of the beginning of the story of the Tower of Babel. God is going to "go down" to see what "they" have done. But God decides first to confide his intentions to Abraham, because God has chosen Abraham to lead his

descendants in the way of righteousness and justice. (So, as in 6:5-8, the Yahwist sees into the heart of YHWH as a way of stating the writer's own theological understanding.) Verses 20-33 contain the wonderful interplay between Abraham and YHWH, which speaks volumes about the kind of relationship that the Old Testament sees as possible with God. Abraham's interceding for Sodom also raises the very important question of communal responsibility*.

The ancient concept lying behind the law of blood revenge is that the whole community must suffer for the sins of any of its members. This passage takes issue with that point of view. The law of blood revenge eventually came to be modified by the law of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth"—often called the lex talionis*. Bloody as this sounds, it was a call for a sense of proportion to replace all-out massacre in avenging a wrong. And Jesus would call for a different standard when he said that we should not seek vengeance at all. What we have in Abraham's pleading

with YHWH, however, is different from all of these. Instead he turns the communal responsibility argument around: if the many are to suffer for the sins of the few, might not the righteousness of the few make up for the sins of the many? This is certainly no less just or fair than the harsher alternative. Put another way, there is no more fairness in getting off free because others are righteous than for many to suffer because some are sinful. It is, however, more merciful.

In Second Isaiah—the part of Isaiah after chapter 40 which was written by someone other than the pre-exilic prophet of that name—that point is carried to its logical conclusion. Isaiah 52:13ff., the great poem of the "Suffering Servant," written during or after the Exile, says, "By his bruises we are healed" (Isa. 53:5b). The suffering servant is seen as atoning for the unrighteousness of many. For the Christian, of course, the servant is seen as a type of Jesus, who redeems many by his innocent suffering. Later rabbinic thought held also to this idea—that Israel as a whole is so sinful as to merit destruction, but is spared because of the very few pious people.

Genesis 19:1-11

When the two angels come to Sodom, Lot presses his hospitality on them. And when the men of the town come and demand to have the two "men" sent out of the house to them, Lot actually tries to protect his guests by offering his virginal daughters instead. This shows two things about the times: the importance of the obligation to protect one's guests under the rule of hospitality and the low status of women.

Genesis 19:12-26

The angels warn Lot to leave. He in turn warns his sons-in-law, but they refuse to take him seriously. The angels then almost bodily take Lot, his wife, and his daughters out of the city and send them away with the warning not to look back. We see evidence that the Lot stories are made of many fragments when we notice that in verses 18-22, Lot pleads not to have to go to the hills and is allowed to go to the village of Zoar instead; then in verse 30 Lot is afraid to be in Zoar and goes to a cave in the hills. The episode in which Lot's wife looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt is unquestionably an etiological story to explain the existence of a salt pillar that looked like a woman in the area around the end of the Dead Sea. There are such pillars even today, though the erosion by the wind keeps changing their shapes.

It is now generally thought that the Dead Sea area experienced some sort of volcanic upheaval in the past. There are bitumen pits in the area, and it is very possible that escaping gas could have become ignited and rained down destruction on nearby towns. Such etiological concerns are, however, not of major importance to the writer. The story's main concern is with the sin of Sodom and the role played by Abraham in

interceding for the city.

Genesis 19:27-39

After Lot and his daughters leave Zoar and go to the cave in the hills, a strange story is told. It is a story of incest, but it contains no condemnation of incest. Furthermore it sounds like a story of some kind of universal destruction, so that these three are the last people on earth: “there is not a man on earth to come in to us . . .” (v. 31). It has been suggested that what we have here is a fragment, originally attached to a story of universal destruction like the story of the Flood. Also, as in the flood story, wine gets the father drunk so that he does not know what is happening. The children of the incestuous relation are Moab, the father of the Moabites, and Ben-ammi, the

father of the Ammonites. These are Israel’s two closest relations across the Jordan. It is clear that they did not understand the story as a condemnation of incest; it may have been told by the Moabites and Ammonites with pride, as proof that their blood was not mixed, being all of a father and his two daughters. We continue our discussion of the Abraham saga in the next chapter with the two different accounts of the covenant between God and Abraham. Remember that this story is important for at least two reasons. It gives us an understanding of how the people of Israel interpreted themselves, and it announces the theme of redemption which is the divine response to the condition of sin described in the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Redemption takes place in terms of covenant, as we shall discover. Let’s begin thinking about the redemption theme not only in terms of the promise that it holds out for humankind, but also in terms of how it counters sin.