PARALLEL GUIDE 9
The Abraham Saga (Part Two)

Summary: This chapter continues the study of the Abraham saga, giving particular emphasis to the J and P accounts of the covenant between God and Abraham, which defines Israel's relationship with Yahweh and reveals the divine plan for redeeming all humanity.

Learning Objectives

• Read Genesis 15-18, 21:1-21, 22:1-19, 23:1-20, and 25:1-20

• State the significance of the name change from Abram to Abraham

• State the circumstances that made circumcision an important rite for Israel

• Tell what point the author seeks to make by the announcement that Sarah will have a child

• State the main point in the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac

• Learn the meaning of the Hebrew word *chesed*

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Define these terms: henotheism, polytheism, monotheism, *chesed*.

2. State the meaning of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* used by Rudolph Otto. What does this mean for you?

3. Søren Kierkegaard's book, *Fear and Trembling*, is a reflective study of the story of Isaac. Locate a copy and read it as part of your reflection.

4. Circumcision is an important rite for Israel. What signs and marks do we use to denote that we are Christians?

Preparing for Your Seminar

What is the main point in the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac? Is it ever right to do something that is contrary to your own ethical standards? How do you justify your answer in relation to the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac on the one hand, and the necessity of moral laws on the other? What response do you make to Søren Kierkegaard's question: "Is there such a thing as a teleological suspension of the ethical?" Loosely translated, this means: "Does the end justify the means?"

Chapter 9
THE ABRAHAM SAGA (Part Two)

In this chapter we continue our thematic study of the Abraham saga. You may wish to reread the entire story (Gen.12:1-25:10) at this point.

Genesis 15:1-6

The Covenant: The J Account

This is the first formal account of the covenant with Abram. The second account is in chapter 17. These passages, along with the call of Abram in 12:1-3, are basic to Israel's self-understanding.

In this account, YHWH comes to Abram in a vision—not a dream—and says that YHWH is Abram's shield, and that the reward Abram will receive will be very great. The word "shield" is used fairly frequently in the patriarchal stories, suggesting that it might have been at one time a divine name.

When YHWH assures Abram that he will have his own descendants and will not have to adopt his slave Eliezer, Abram "believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness" (v. 6). Abram is not described as being righteous—Noah was the last righteous man. Because in the situation at hand Abram acts rightly, that is, in faith and trust, he is reckoned as righteous by YHWH. Though he has acted deceitfully in Egypt, and is therefore not a righteous man, nevertheless he is counted in this act of faith as being in a right relationship with God.

Genesis 15:7-21

The account of the covenant continues in these verses, but a different strand is picked up. Up to this point Abram has been outside at night with the stars overhead (v. 5). Now the time changes to day. (The fact that this is from a different source tradition is also shown by the reference to God's having called Abram from Ur of the Chaldeans instead of from Haran.) When Abram asks how he can know that he will possess the land, YHWH commands him to sacrifice various animals and birds, cutting their carcasses in two and providing a passageway between them. (There is incidentally nothing significant in his not dividing the birds in two: the formation of the breastbone of a bird makes this difficult to do.)

The parties to a covenant sealed it by passing between the carcasses, thus saying in effect, "May this same fate come to me if I do not keep my word." In the "deep sleep"—the same supernatural sleep as that which befell Adam when woman was made from his ribs—Abram sees the smoking fire pot and the flaming torch pass through the carcasses, sealing the covenant. Note that Abram does not pass through them; no such response is required of him. The imagery of the smoking fire pot and the flaming torch contain traditional elements to stand for God's presence. We see later how God is present to Israel in the wilderness in the form of "a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night." More significant than the form of the symbols, is the fact that it is God who is bound—freely, willingly—to this covenant, but not Abraham.

In his book *The Idea of the Holy*,[top] Rudolf Otto finds the basis for all religious attitude in the experience of "the holy." He describes the holy in the Latin phrase *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*—the mystery which both attracts with its fascination and terrifies with its overwhelming power. This is what the J writer seeks to portray by means of the "deep sleep" and the images of fire and smoke. Abram cannot stand to see the *mysterium tremendum* directly; yet it is the presence of that mystery which assures him of the reality of the covenant—it is a *mysterium fascinans*. Otto maintains that it is the combination of these two contradictory aspects that makes an experience truly religious. An experience which simply overwhelms in a purely negative way could not be an experience of the divine but only of the demonic; one which attracts without striking fear would be merely sentimental. In the covenant God promises to give the land that reaches from the "river of Egypt" (not the Nile but a brook in the desert on the way to Egypt) to the Euphrates. This was the extent of the kingdom under King David, and the J writer is intent on showing that these promises came true under David. Later writers, after the downfall of the Davidic golden age, had problems with this. Indeed,

the Old Testament ends on a note of frustration about the promises, and looks for their fulfillment only by a special divine act at the close of history. Verses 13-16 attempt to deal with the problem: why didn't Abram himself or his more immediate descendants inherit the land? They were to be as strangers in the land and would inherit it only after "the iniquity of the Amorites" had become full. These verses are a recitation of the history of the Egyptian sojourn, the Exodus, and the conquest of the land, justifying these events as decrees of YHWH and explaining why the promises were not fulfilled immediately.

Genesis 17:1-8 The Covenant: The P Account

In the P account of the covenant, the promises are again made to Abram, but this time the name of God is El Shaddai, usually translated "God Almighty." This is not simply a way of saying that God—that is, YHWH—is almighty; it is a different name for the deity. It is one of many names for the chief god which we find in ancient Palestinian religion. El Elyon, El Shaddai, Elohim (when, as by the E writer, it is used as a proper name rather than simply as the heavenly court)—these are all variants of the simple name El. There were many gods in Palestinian religion, and El was usually named as the head of them all. The name YHWH—and variants such as Yah—was also a common name in pre-Israelite religion.

Israel eventually arrived at monotheism—the belief that there is only one God—and certainly this was the view held by the final editors of Genesis. This was not the view that was held, however, throughout the times of which the patriarchal stories speak. If the religion was not a thoroughgoing polytheism, with El at the head of the gods (the original "heavenly court"), it was most likely a form of henotheism. The word "henotheism" means "one god" as does "monotheism." Both words come from Greek, in which there are two words for "one": heno means "one" in an arithmetic sense, as in "one, two, three"; monos means "one" in the sense of "only" or "unique." So henotheism is the view that there is only one god for this particular tribe or nation, but it does recognize the existence of other gods for other tribes or nations.top

The Yahwist writer uses the name YHWH throughout, but P is probably closer to the actual "truth" of history in preserving different names for the god; in this period of the patriarchs it is very likely that henotheism was the rule and that the patriarchs "called on" God by more than one name. Still, by using the various names for the god almost interchangeably, the P writer claims that all these gods, by whatever name, are really the one true God of Israel.

Verse 5 describes the changing of Abram's name to Abrahamtop. The insertion of the Hebrew letter "Hay" into the names of Abram and Sarai represents the insertion of God's name into theirs. What is significant about the change is that it is made at the command of God. The naming of something, as we saw in the creation story when Adam named the animals, means that one takes possession of the thing named. When this is done to a person, it means the same thing and implies that the namer is ruler over the named. For example, in II Chronicles 36:1-4, Pharaoh Neco of Egypt charges through Judah, slays the king, and installs his puppet, Eliakim, on the throne, changing his name to Jehoiakim as a sign that he "belongs" to the pharaoh. So God's changing Abram's name to Abraham means that Abraham has become, as a result of the covenant, God's particular friend.

Genesis 17:9-14

The covenant which God makes with Abraham here contains the same promises as the earlier one in chapter 15, but the terms are different. The amazing thing about the Yahwist version of the covenant in chapter 15 is that no acceptance of terms is required of Abram; the "agreement" is a sheer act of grace on YHWH's part. Normally, a covenant is an agreement which is offered by a superior party to an inferior. The inferior party is required to show that he or she accepts the terms which the superior offers. The covenant is not imposed by

the superior, yet the superior is bound to its terms, so it is not simply a show of superiority, but the inferior must make some sign of acceptance. In chapter 15 Abram is not required to do anything to show he accepts the covenant except to respond in faith to God's promise of an heir. YHWH binds himself to the covenant by passing between the halved carcasses, but Abram does nothing.

In the P version, however, the condition for the covenant is the acceptance of circumcision[top]. By this rite the person's commitment to the covenant is lastingly expressed in the flesh. Where did this rite come from? What is its basic significance? Besides this text, we might look at two other references to circumcision: Exodus 4:24-26 and Joshua 5:2-8. The Exodus fragment is very strange. God has commissioned Moses to return to Egypt and bring forth his people. While Moses is on the way, God meets him and tries to kill him. All sorts of attempts have been made to demonstrate that the text does not say what in fact it does say. Interpretation is difficult because the Hebrew text has no personal names for the males, only pronouns, "he" and "his."

Then Zipporah, Moses' wife, cuts off "his" foreskin and touches it to "his" feet, saying, "Truely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" (v. 25). With this, God leaves Moses alone. "Bridegroom" and "circumcision" are from the same root word in

Hebrew. This instance of a kind of vicarious circumcision—the son's foreskin being applied to Moses, if that is in fact how we should sort out the pronouns—and the relationship of the two words may indicate that circumcision was originally a marriage rite.

The Joshua passage shows Joshua leading his little band—the story makes it sound like a mighty army, but it was not—to attack the Canaanites and take the land. The writer tries to make the crossing of the Jordan by Joshua seem as important as the crossing of the Red Sea by Moses; it is an attempt to elevate Joshua to a position equal to that of his predecessor. Joshua instructs the people to make flint knives (even though they are in the copper age—but this may show the antiquity of the rite) and to circumcise the men again "the second time." The writer goes to great lengths (Josh. 5:5-7) to explain that this is not really the second time, since those whom Moses circumcised had all died in the wilderness, but the text explicitly says "the second time." The inappropriateness of the act is amazing. Just before a battle, the whole army is immobilized while waiting for the circumcisions to heal!

We probably have here three accounts of the origin of the rite of circumcision, all of which have been reworked in the transmission of the old tradition. The Gen. 17 account shows the precision of the P writer, for whom this has become an extremely important matter in the cultus. The strangeness of the two other accounts shows that they are very old, are out of their original context, and yet are important enough to be preserved even if they do not make sense to us in their present setting.

We do not know the actual historical origin of the practice, although its association with marriage does seem likely. Prior to the Exile, although it was practiced by most of the peoples of the ancient Near East, including the Egyptians, and was of very ancient origins, circumcision was not of particular importance to Israel. Not until the Exile, when Israel was surrounded by Babylonians—who did not practice it—did it become important. Then, together with the observance of the Sabbath and of the laws about eating certain foods under detailed conditions, circumcision became a means for reminding the Jews of their heritage and for distinguishing and preserving them as a people.

Although the importance of the rite comes much later, the P writer does here what was also done with the Sabbath in Gen. 1. He pushes its foundation back as early as possible, to Abraham the father of the people, to show that the rite is inseparable from Israel's life under the covenant.

Genesis 17:15-27

The changing of Sarai's name to Sarah has the same significance as the changing of her husband's name. Abraham fell on his face with laughter at God's promise that Sarah would bear him a son—the idea was so absurd. He asks instead that God look favorably on his son Ishmael, whose mother is Hagar, Sarah's maid. God will not be put off, however—although God does not rebuke Abraham for laughing as Sarah is rebuked in 18:13-15. He insists that Sarah will bear a son who is to be called Isaac ("laughter"). So, too, God claims Isaac as God's own by naming him. (Notice the similar situation in Luke 1:31, where a miraculous birth is promised to Mary and the name of the child, Jesus, is given.)

God does hear Abraham's plea for Ishmael, however, and promises to bless him and to make him the father of twelve princes. (The list of the names of Ishmael's sons in 25:12-16 shows that this promise is kept.) Once again, the kinship of Israel with the "Ishmaelites" is acknowledged, although the right of Israel alone to the covenant is also expressed (v. 21).

The next section, 18:1-15, is not part of the P account of the covenant, nor is it yet the Lot motif which comes up again in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (18:16-19:29). It is by the Yahwist and parallels the story of the announcement to Abraham that Sarah will bear him a child (17:16-l9).

Genesis 18:1-8

In this story YHWH and the "three men" seem interchangeable. This has been interpreted in various ways. We might see the three as "angels" (messengers or representatives of God, not, as later art pictured them, people with wings!). The narrative slips back and forth between speaking of them and speaking of YHWH himself.

Such circumlocutions—indirect or roundabout references to God—are a common literary practice in the Bible. Or we might see two of the men as angels and the third man as YHWH in human form. This interpretation would fit with 18:22, where the men go off toward Sodom, but apparently YHWH is still there with Abraham, and with 19:1 which says that two angels came to Sodom. It is certain that the practice of many early Christian theologians of interpreting the three men as a type of the trinity is not what the writer intended. This is not to say that such an interpretation is impossible. It is, however, a product of a certain time and a method no longer current. At any rate, YHWH is present in this incident and is at least represented by the two angels in the following story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. (That story, you will recall, has been discussed above in Chapter Eight.) Perhaps the "confusion" is in our minds only. Perhaps J is wanting to make clear that what happened was not a routine, everyday event, nor one that Abraham or Sarah could later describe adequately to someone who had not been present.

The setting of this story typifies the way of life of nomads, among whom hospitality is one of the most sacred of duties. In a way of life in which one has no permanent roots and is constantly on the move, one could not survive without counting on hospitality. All become equally in need of one another trying to survive. So, Abraham offers his hospitality to the "three men," giving them a meal complete with cakes, which he asks Sarah to make, and a calf.

Genesis 18:9-15

The "three men" ask after Sarah, who is inside the tent. YHWH then tells Abraham that in the springtime Sarah will have a child. Sarah, who can hear this though she is not seen by the others, laughs to herself. But YHWH, who knows her thoughts, asks why she has laughed. The rebuke is clear from the stern way in which YHWH rejects her fearful denial. But then YHWH continues: "Is anything too hard"—"or too wonderful"—

for the LORD?" This is the main point for the writer. YHWH can be counted upon to keep promises, even when they are impossible by human standards. (For a similar incident, with similar results, see Luke 1.)

The Hagar-Ishmael Motif

It was the legal and usual practice in the ancient Near East for a wife who was barren to offer her maid as a substitute childbearer. During the birth, the barren

wife would hold the maid on her own knees so that as the child emerged it would become symbolically—and legally—her own. When Hagar, Sarai's maid, becomes pregnant, she looks with contempt on her mistress. This is a very realistic note, as is Sarai's fury.

When Sarai demands that Abram judge between them, Abram's response—that Hagar belongs to Sarai and that she can do with her as she wishes—is not in accord with ancient law. By law it was required of the father of a child to make sure that the child was safe. The version in chapter 21, to which we turn momentarily, is a truer picture: when Abraham is asked to cast out Hagar and Ishmael, he finds the thing to be "very distressing . . . on account of his son." What were clearly two accounts of the same story have been made two separate events. There is an attempt to reconcile the two accounts in 16:7-9, where the angel tells Hagar to return to her mistress. Here verses 10-12—describing the angel's promise of the son, Ishmael, to Hagar— show the Israelites' recognition of the fact that they were related to the nomadic Bedouin tribes which roamed the desert areas. Ishmael is the father of these tribes. "He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin." This is a good description of the Bedouin, continually moving, shifting, getting along as best he can, stealing when necessary.

Verses 13-14, an etymological story about the name Beer-lahai-roi, reflect the belief or fear that if one saw God, one would not live. This belief appears in several places in the Old Testament, although there is no consistency about it. Abraham walks around with God and talks with him, and yet when Moses asks to see God, he is told that he cannot see him face to face, but that God will cover him with his hand as he passes by, and Moses will see only God's back or silhouette. It is out of the ancient fear that to look on God is to die that Hagar says in amazement, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" or "Have I even here seen after him who sees me?" (v. 13).

Genesis 21:9-21

This is, as we have noted, a doublet (or parallel passage) of the scene in chapter 16, though it is combined also with a more lengthy account of Hagar's banishment. The story seems to have similarities with the near-sacrifice of Isaac which is to come in chapter 22: the child Ishmael is at the point of death and God intervenes to bring salvation and a promise—Ishmael, too, is to become a great nation. He grows up in the wilderness, becomes a great archer, and takes an Egyptian wife. The Arabs to this day regard themselves as descendants of Abraham and Hagar, which is why they hold Abraham in such great esteem. His supposed tomb, the cave of Machpelah (23:8-20), is traditionally claimed to be located under the Muslim mosque in Hebron. The foundations of the mosque are stones from the time of Herod, showing that the place was venerated by the Hebrews at that time. On top of that the crusaders built a castle and church, later taken over by the Muslims and converted into a mosque.

Genesis 21:1-8
The Isaac Motif

The birth of Isaac is told in very concise terms. In accordance with the Priestly ac count of the covenant,

Abraham circumcises Isaac on the eighth day. In verse 6 there is a play on words as Sarah, recalling her own laughter at the promise of a child, says

that Isaac's birth has given her laughter—the laughter now of joy—and will also give laughter to those who see that a woman her age has borne a child.

Genesis 22:1-19

The story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac is one of the high points in the Old Testament[top]. It is told in very simple terms; in the Hebrew it is especially noticeable that there is not one word too many. The pregnant silences as Abraham and his son are on their way to the mountain of sacrifice say much more of the solemnity of the occasion than many words could.

When God speaks to Abraham, Abraham answers, "Here am I." The same words are used again and again in the Old Testament to indicate the response which human faith makes to God's call. Contrast this response to that which Adam made to God's approach to him in the garden: Adam hid. God was asking Adam where he stood in relation to God when he asked, "Where are you?" There is no need for God to ask this in speaking to those who have faith. The words "Here am I" are always the response of faith.

In the command to sacrifice Isaac, brief phrases are piled up in such a way as to show the horror and the tremendous stakes involved: "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love . . ." (v. 2). (The Hebrew draws the tension even tighter: "Take your son, the one-like-you, whom you love, Isaac . . . .") The fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham, on the strength of which he left everything behind him, depend entirely on Isaac. Isaac has become the heir, not Ishmael. He, the only son, the beloved son, the one who was born impossibly, solely by the power of God, is now to be sacrificed.

There is no indication of where the sacrifice is to be made. The site is in the land of Moriah, but the only other designation is "one of the mountains that I shall show you" (v. 2). The motif of movement into the unknown characterizes the calls which God issues to Abraham and to humankind.

When they get to the place of sacrifice and the grim preparations are being made, Isaac calls out to his father. Abraham replies, "Here am I, my son" (v. 7). We are told nothing of what is going on in Abraham's mind. He has come to this place with his son in obedience to God. What he thinks or feels is not important to the teller of the story—obedience is all that matters. Here, in Abraham's reply to Isaac, we see the same response of faithfulness that was made to God—"Here am I." There is no evasion at the level of fidelity to his son, however much there may have been merciful silence concerning what is to happen; there is no sense of guilt or betrayal that would cause him to turn from the encounter with his son.

The angel of YHWH (which means YHWH) calls again, and again the response is "Here am I" (v. 11). Because Abraham has shown that he fears God, he is not required to go on with the sacrifice of his son; a ram is provided as a substitute. "Fear" of God is not fright over what God might do to one, but a reverent awe of the majesty of God; such awe is evidence that the lordship of God is realized and with it the proper status of the human creature. Simple fright is the reaction one has to danger;

"the fear of God" is a religious stance, the response to the *mysterium tremendum* of which Otto speaks (see above).

It is almost impossible to make too much of this story. It expresses the heart of the Israelite understanding about the nature of faith. Abraham is asked by God to give up the very substance of God's blessing—his (Abraham's) "seed" through which the blessing would come. Faith is being asked to give up the benefits of faith. The Book of Job labors the issues involved in the question of whether an individual will continue to be devoted to God if the benefits of devotion are withdrawn. Here,3that question is answered without hesitation. Abraham is simply faithful.

Notice that "faith in God" cannot, under the circumstances present here, mean confidence that God will still fulfill promises in spite of the surrender which is being requested; God is demanding the surrender of the very promise itself. We know that in the end God does not require Abraham to go through with it. Abraham could not know this, and yet he is willing to give up the promise. This is the central point here: Abraham's faith is radical obedience to YHWH. The word "faith" has come to mean such things as the calm assurance that God will make all things right for us, the certainty that God exists or perhaps that God has such and such characteristics. In this story, faith is the willingness to be obedient to YHWH, whatever the calling and however much it may run contrary to any human calculations of good and evil.

One of the best commentaries on the religious significance of this story is in Søren Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling. Kierkegaard shows the distinction between the moral life—in which we must make decisions about good and evil based on universally binding principles that would apply to anyone who had to act in similar circumstances—and the religious life, which is based solely and entirely on God's initiative and which transcends the ambiguities and, ultimately, the frustrations of the life of morality. In response to the divine call, at the religious level of life, we are not asked to do that which all people everywhere should also do. The divine call deals with the unique, once-for-all approach of God to a person such that the proper response is the highly personal "here am I" in which the only thing at issue is what God commands. The dangers in this are obvious. What if the call is not from God? To act contrary to one's own considered judgment may be wrong; it will certainly be wrong if the call is not from God. What possible criteria could be used to tell whence the call comes? Interior certainty or strong emotional conviction may equally well accompany neurotic or psychotic episodes. When Kierkegaard speaks, as he does in this book, of the suspension of the ethical in a person's response to his or her unique calling, he is well aware that this is not a simple, uncomplicated act of the will. Faith is a mystery which will not submit to simple analysis and which has many deadly counterfeits.

Concerning the story itself, there are theories that it was once attached to a sanctuary in which human sacrifice had been practiced, in order to prohibit such a practice. We suspect that human sacrifice was practiced by the Hebrews as late as the 8th century BCE (see II Kings 16:3) or possibly even later (II Kings 23:10), although in these late cases it was because the practice of the pagans was being followed.

These references are not completely convincing, however, because we are not sure of the meaning of the cultic words which speak of passing children through fire. Is it a sacrifice of the firstborn, or is it a magical ceremony utilizing fire? By the time of the Book of Deuteronomy, around 621 BCE, child sacrifice is definitely forbidden. Whatever the origin of the story, the concern of the Yahwist writer is not with the cultic practice of child sacrifice, nor indeed with any cultic practice, but with the ultimate demand of faith. As Kierkegaard points out, the question is not whether child sacrifice is an ethical demand—that which all people in similar circumstances should do—but whether Abraham is willing to do even that which, by ethical standards, he should not do, in radical obedience to the call of God. Abraham's radical obedience in spite of his own "knowledge of good and evil" is the opposite of Adam's moral autonomy. When Abraham shows this faithful response, the promise is repeated in the most solemn form: "By myself I have sworn, says the LORD" (22:16).

Genesis 23:1-20 The Cave of Machpelah

This story contains a bit of oriental haggling. It is humorous as each party tries to best the other. Sarah has died, and Abraham is trying to buy land in which to bury her. He asks the Hittites for permission to buy some land for the burial, but he is turned aside with an offer to use any site he wants rather than to buy a site. (These are probably not the Hittites of the much earlier mighty empire; in the Old Testament, "Hittite" is frequently used for any original inhabitant of Canaan.)

Abraham, however, knows exactly what he wants—the cave of Machpelah—and he presses his request. With this kind of bickering going on, we know that he will have to pay a handsome price for it. But Ephron, the owner, now offers to give the site to Abraham, along with the whole field. This could well involve a matter of land-vassalage: if Abraham accepts, he will become the vassal of Ephron's overlord. Abraham presses his request to pay, and ends up paying an exorbitant price for the whole field. So there is established the ancestral sepulchre in which all the patriarchs and their wives are to be buried. (The single exception is Rachel, the most beloved woman in the patriarchal stories—but, as we shall see, there is probably a reason for this omission.)

This is a very short section, but it is important for several reasons. First, it reminds us that Abraham is a sojourner in the land; the land is really YHWH's and Abraham does not yet own it though it has been promised to him. (The theme of the sojourner is quite strong throughout the Old Testament. In later law the protection of YHWH is extended even to the sojourner: "You shall also love the stranger; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" [Deut. 10:19].) Second, this event shows the first legally binding claim of Israel to the land. Israel's right to the land was always a sensitive point since she was a relative latecomer and acquired the land by conquest.

Finally, the story is the source of the tradition that accounts for the veneration of the presumed site of the tomb.

Genesis 24:1-67 Palestinians

In this chapter we have the lengthy story of how Rebekah was acquired as a wife for Isaac. Abraham is on his deathbed and calls his servant, probably—or, at least, traditionally—the Eliezer of Damascus whom Abraham had considered making his heir. Abraham has him swear by his (Abraham's) genitals, the source of procreation and therefore the most sacred part of the body, that he will get a wife for Isaac from

Abraham's own people rather than from among the Canaanites.[top] The oath is qualified, however: while the servant is to try to get such a wife, if she will not come, Eliezer will not be held responsible. He must not take Isaac back there, either; Isaac must not return to the land of his forebears, but must remain in the land of promise. In verse 14, in the context of setting up the sign that would let the servant know which woman God had picked for Isaac, there appears in the Hebrew a word which is very important to the Old Testament understanding of God: the word is chesed (the ch represents the Hebrew letter het and is pronounced as a hard "h" rasping in the back of the throat), and in the NRSV Bible it is translated, wherever possible, as "steadfast love." It means such things as loyalty, trust, truthfulness to one's own nature, love without sentimentality, and concern. The usual King James translation is the beautiful "lovingkindness," and to say that chesed is love without sentimentality is not to say that it is love without tenderness. The New Testament Greek word for "grace"—charis (pronounced CAH-riss) carries some of this meaning, but not all. So does the New Testament word agape (ah-GAH-pay or AH-gah-pay), one of the Greek words for "love." In verse 14 the translation "steadfast love" is weak. The meaning here is that by this sign God will show that God has given continuing support, concern, loyalty, trust, and love to Abraham.

Rebekah appears, fulfills the sign, and reveals that she is of the same family as Abraham; what could be

better? Then we meet Laban, whom we will meet again in the Jacob saga. The picture of Laban is very clearly drawn: he is an opportunist, playing every angle for his own benefit. His response to Abraham's servant is absolutely proper: "The thing comes from the LORD; we cannot speak to you anything bad or good" (v. 50). That is, he cannot give a judgment of good or evil, but simply must obey. One suspects that he is not dismayed when the servant gives him costly presents!

Isaac himself plays a very small role in the stories of the patriarchs. Unlike Abraham and Jacob, he is not the subject of a complete saga. He seems to be little more than a link—a literary device—between Abraham and Jacob. Isaac's wife comes from the land of Abraham, and so does Jacob's, and the figure of Laban is common to both. Besides serving as a link, Isaac is the symbol of the promise, including the threat of the loss of it in his near-sacrifice.

When Rebekah sees Isaac and asks who he is, the servant replies, "It is my master" (v. 65). In the beginning of the story, Abraham was his master. It looks as though, in the original form of this tradition, Abraham died before Rebekah arrived, so that

Isaac would be the servant's master. In the present version the death of Abraham has to be postponed in order that the following may happen.

Genesis 25:1-5

These verses are not part of the Isaac motif as such. They are a programmatic statement intended to show that Israel has exclusive rights in Palestine. The man, who was too old to have children when Isaac was born and who was on his deathbed when he sent for Isaac's wife, takes Keturah as a wife and has six children by her! Thus is Abraham linked with the various tribes in the Arabian desert. They are his children by his concubine to whom he gave gifts and whom he sent away to the east.

Genesis 25:6-10

Abraham dies at the age of 175. Verse 8 shows the Hebrew understanding of the good life: a long life and a quiet death. A short life and a violent death are seen as punishment from YHWH; their opposite is a blessing from him. To say that he "was gathered to his people" is, of course, not true of Abraham. He is buried in the cave of Machpelah, where only his wife Sarah lies. The phrase had become a standard way of speaking of the end of a good life, and it is applied to Abraham in spite of its inaccuracy. That he is buried by both Isaac and Ishmael suggests that this may come from a tradition which did not know of Ishmael's expulsion. This section is, in fact, from the Priestly writer and shows the usual characteristics: the importance of precise dating (Abraham's exact age), the brevity with which everything is summed up, and the genealogy of Ishmael.

This genealogy shows twelve sons of Ishmael, twelve desert tribes. There seems to be a twelve-tribe pattern in the case of several ancient peoples besides Israel. This probably shows the need for a separate tribe to take care of the central shrine of a confederation of tribes for each month of the year. Such a confederation of tribes for the maintenance of a central shrine is called an "amphictyony" (pronounced am-FICK-tee-oh-nee), a word you should remember for the later study of the tribal organization of Israel and its development into a monarchy.

This is the end of the Abraham saga. There is much detail in it, but its central point is clear: Israel's relationship to YHWH is set forth in the covenant with Abraham. In the story of the Exodus and the covenant at Sinai, a different historical setting is provided and the covenant with its terms is more fully spelled out, but the major point is the same. The covenant with Israel is God's means of redeeming all the world from the

disruptions which human sin has introduced into creation, and it is based entirely on God's initiative. The call and the covenant of promise which goes with it can only be responded to in faith; it cannot be empowered by any act of human ingenuity or strength, but indeed persists in the face of human stupidity and weakness.