

Scripture

Lesson Notes • Deacon Lázaro J. Ulloa

The Patriarchal Narratives

The Yahwist author now narrows the focus of his story to one individual (Abraham) and his descendants. Throughout these sagas, the main theme is that of promise and fulfillment. The earliest form of the promise may have been only the promise of a son, but as the tradition developed, it was expanded to include many descendants, land, greatness as a nation, and blessing.

THE ABRAHAM CYCLE 11:28-25:18

The Call of Abram 11:28; 12:1-9

The promise to Abram represents a new phase in the Yahwist narrative. No longer is the focus of the story on all of humanity, rather it shifts to on person who will soon become a family and finally a nation. The choice of Abram is a mystery in the story, demonstrating God's initiative.

The promise is dominated by the word "bless" (five times). The promise is a sign of divine favor. To be a great nation, Abram needs both descendants and land. Contrary to the story of Babel, Abram receives fame from God and not by making a name for himself. The promise that all nations will be blessed through Abram was understood to mean that Israel would actually be the mediator of God's blessing to the world. The subject of faith is a constant factor throughout the cycle of Abraham. Abram and Abraham are variants of the same name, as are Sarai and Sarah. The changes in their name occur to indicate their new relationship to God.

The author deliberately records *Shechem* as Abram's first stop because of the importance this ancient Canaanite city had to the early Israelite cult. The author places Abraham and Jacob worshipping in several Canaanite cities as a way of explaining why these originally pagan cities became centers of worship in Israel. The terebinth of Moreh (verse 6) was a sacred tree where Yahweh promises to give Abram the land of Canaan. The fact that the Canaanites were in the land hints at the promise of "land" will be fulfilled by Abram's descendants and not during his lifetime.

Sarai in Danger 12:10-20

Soon after the promise of the land, Abram travels to Egypt due to a famine. Although it was not unusual for Semitic people to travel to Egypt in search of food, it doesn't put Abram in the best light, especially since he even goes as far as compromising his wife's honor. Abram persuades Sarai to lie about being his wife. Despite this apparent lack of faith on behalf of the patriarch, Yahweh intervenes and defends Abram.

It must be noted that an ancient Hurrian practice in northern Mesopotamia allowed a husband to adopt his wife as a sister, thus giving him greater control over his wife and at the same time giving the wife more protection and privileges than an ordinary wife. This practice died out prior to the writing of Genesis, however the writer seems to be unaware of this.

Scripture

Lesson Notes • Deacon Lázaro J. Ulloa

This story is repeated in 20:1-18 (Eloist account) and 26:6-11 (Yahwist account) but with variation in the characters and incidents. These stories show that in spite of what Abram and Sarai do, they are under God's protection, and God will intervene to secure the future realization of the promise. The story and the context in which it's found present several difficulties. How does Pharaoh know that the plague is sent because of Sarai? How does he learn that Sarai is Abram's wife? These questions are never answered. These and other inconsistencies are of no importance to the writer although they bother today's reader. The writer's only interest is God's intervention.

Lot and Abram Separate 13:1-18

What is of importance in this story is that after separating from Lot, Abram walks the length and breadth of the land. This is a symbolic act that indicates that he is taking legal possession of it, even though it is not his. Within this story, Yahweh again promises the land to Abram, but also adds the promise of innumerable descendants.

Abram and Melchizedek 14:1-24

There is universal agreement among scholars that Gen 14 is one of the most difficult chapters of the Book of Genesis. It is so different from the rest of the patriarchal narratives that scholars speak of it as an insertion into the patriarchal narratives, independent of any of the sources we have discussed. Abram is pictured not as a peaceful nomad, but as a commander of forces involved in a war. However, we will focus on Abram and Melchizedek.

The name Melchizedek means "Zedek [a god] is my king." The city of Salem is to be identified with Jerusalem. The god that he worships, "God Most High, the creator of heaven and earth" (verse 19), was the head of the Canaanite pantheon and supreme over the other gods of the world. Melchizedek offers Abram bread and wine, which could be of some ritual significance. Abram, for his part, identifies Yahweh with God Most High (verse 22) and accepts the blessing. There seems to be some confusion regarding who blesses whom and who pays tribute to whom. The context seems to indicate that Melchizedek blesses and pays tribute to Abram.

The Covenant with Abram 15:1-21

The covenant ceremony takes place at sunset in verse 12 and 17, yet in verse 5 it is already night. In verse 8, Abram expresses doubt, but his faith is emphasized in verse 6. Yahweh's name is revealed in verse 7, but is already known by Abram in verse 2.

The first six verses show elements from a prophetic tradition. The opening phrase, "this word of the Lord came to Abram", suggests that the author sees in God's call to Abram a call similar to that of a prophet. Yahweh's admonition against fear is not unusual, for in the ancient world an encounter with the Deity was understood as a terror-filled event.

Abram is concerned that a servant born in his household will become his heir. The practice of a slave becoming the heir of a childless couple is recorded in texts from Nuzi

Scripture

Lesson Notes • Deacon Lázaro J. Ulloa

dating from the 15th century B.C.E. in Mesopotamia. However, Yahweh response to Abram is assurance that he will have an heir from Sarai. Abram responds with faith.

The covenant ceremony described in verses 9-11 and 17-20 is a primitive ritual that was widespread in the Near East. We find its significance in Jer 34:18: cutting the animal in two and walking between the separate pieces bound the parties in covenant. If they failed to keep the terms of the covenant, they were cursed to share a fate like that of the split animal. The flaming torch and fire pot is a sign of the presence of God.

This chapter confirms God's covenant with Abram. He will have a son, he will have many descendants, and one day they will possess the land.

Birth of Ishmael 16:1-16

This story is primarily the work of the Yahwist author. We are presented with the jealousy and frustration of Sarai, the arrogance of Hagar, and Abram's passivity. Sarai's desire to give an heir to Abram through her servant Hagar was a legally acceptable and binding custom in Mesopotamia, however, should the servant desire to elevate herself to the same status as the actual wife, she could be returned to her place as servant. This is precisely what Abram does. Sarai's severity with Hagar, however, far exceeds the law and hurts her character in the eyes of the reader.

Hagar flees because of Sarai's harsh treatment, and God appears to her with a promise that echoes that of Abram's: she will be the mother of many descendant's. The purpose of this story is to show that the fulfillment of God's promise depends on God and not on any human intervention, as Abram and Sarai intended.

The Covenant 17:1-14

The covenant already narrated by the Yahwist author is recounted here by the Priestly tradition. It lacks the human-interest quality of the Yahwist. Here the covenant is portrayed as a contract and not an oath as with the Yahwist. God will give Abram many descendants; Abram is commanded to walk in God's presence, to be blameless, and to practice circumcision. Note that the need for circumcision comes only after Abram has tried to fulfill God's promise through human intervention. St. Paul will make reference to this as a consequence of Abram's disobedience or lack of faith. Abram's name is changed to Abraham signifying his new relationship to God and the new life granted by the covenant.

The Priestly author also extends the covenant to Abraham's descendants, and it will be everlasting (verse 7). Additionally, a new relationship with God becomes part of the covenant: God will be the God of Abraham and the God of his descendants. This is in anticipation of the relationship between God and Israel that will be established in the Sinai during the Exodus.

Scripture

Lesson Notes • Deacon Lázaro J. Ulloa

The fact that circumcision takes on such an important role is that the Priestly tradition found in the book of Genesis originated during Israel's exile to Babylon (586-538 B.C.E.). During this time the exiles living in Babylon took circumcision to be a sign of their religious identity and thus became a sign of inclusion in the community that worships God. If someone is not circumcised, he is not considered a member of the covenanted people (verse 14).

Announcement of the Birth of Isaac 17:15-18-15

In all three sources – Yahwist, Elohist and Priestly – Isaac is the child of the promise, and shows God's great power in make the impossible a reality. Just as Abram's name was changed to signal his new role, now Sarai's name is also changed to Sarah to show her new role as mother. Both Sarah and Abraham laugh in disbelief to the announcement and gives explanation to Isaac's name which means "laughter". God assures Abraham that Ishmael will not be forgotten, but the covenant is to be with Isaac's descendants.

The Yahwist account presents us with a problem relating to God's identity. God appears to Abraham, but he sees three strangers. The story continually shifts between Yahweh and the three strangers making God's true identity somewhat ambiguous. This should not be taken to mean that the author had knowledge of the Trinity.

Abraham demonstrates to a degree of excess the nomadic practice (law) of hospitality to his three visitors, perhaps suspecting their divine character and hoping for a favor from them.

Abraham's intercession for Sodom and its destruction 18:16-19-29

God reveals his intentions to Abraham (his chosen one) in order that he might be able to teach his descendants about God's justice. The destruction of Sodom takes on a special admonitory significance for all future generations. The conversation between Abraham and Yahweh is an entertaining example of Oriental bargaining at its best, but the underlying concerns are serious, as the question of justice is at stake. Is it just to destroy the innocent, few as they may be, along with the vast majority who are guilty? The episode reveals Yahweh's patience and great willingness to set aside punishment for the sake of the innocent few.

In the saga of Sodom's destruction, the most difficult passage for today's reader is Lot's willingness to offer his two virgin daughters in place of the two guests. Although today's reader would be shocked at such a thing, the ancient audience not have been so horrified. The would have seen in Lot's offer a noble attempt, even if extreme, to fulfill the demands of hospitality.

Sarah is endangered a second time 20:1-18

This story parallels the Yahwist account from Gen 12:10-20 although there are several differences. There is universal agreement that this story is the product of the Elohist writer. In addition to the use of the name Elohim for the divine name, the Elohist's

Scripture

Lesson Notes • Deacon Lázaro J. Ulloa

authorship is indicated by the use of dreams as a means of divine communication and the moral sensitivity that leaves no doubt that God intervened on Sarah's behalf before Abimelech touched her. In the Yahwist version, it is unclear whether Pharaoh actually had relations with Sarah. Whereas the Yahwist allows Abraham's behavior to speak for itself, the Elohist explains Abraham's actions in order to present a more honorable picture of his ancestor.

Birth of Isaac and expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael 21:1-21

All three sources are found in this story. The Yahwist version (verse 21:1, 6b, 7) simply presents the birth of Isaac in Sarah's old age as the fulfillment of the promise. The Priestly version (verse 21:2-5) also claims Isaac's birth as the fulfillment of the promise, but adds that Abraham named and circumcised the child according to God's command (verse 17:19, 12). The Elohist version (verse 21:6a) only retains the motif of laughter associated with Isaac's name.

The Elohist version of Isaac's birth (verses 8-21) duplicates the story of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael that was found in the Yahwist version in chapter 16, but here the reason for Hagar's expulsion is Sarah's jealousy and not Hagar's arrogance. God insures the future of both the child of the promise (Isaac) and the child of Hagar (Ishmael).

Abraham and Abimelech at Beer-sheba 21:22-34

The purpose of this account is to show that the well at Beer-sheba, a sacred place for Israel, originated with Abraham.

Sacrifice of Isaac 22:1-19

It is clear that the story is concerned with Abraham's great faith, which is expressed in his willingness to sacrifice his son in accord with God's command. The story also speaks of human sacrifice. Human sacrifice was commonly practiced among Israel's neighbors, and on occasion even in Israel although it was forbidden (see Kings 16:34; 2 Kings 3:27; 23:10). It may be that the story originally centered on a repudiation of the practice of human sacrifice.

Genealogy of Nahor 22:20-23

The genealogy lists Semitic relatives of Israel, and its purpose is to prepare the way for the appearance of Rebekah in chapter 24.

Abraham's purchase of Machpelah 23:1-19

Abraham achieves his personal objective of owning property in Canaan for Sarah's burial. Also, Abraham's possession of a portion of the land stands as a pledge of the future possession of the land in its entirety.

Finding a wife for Isaac and Abraham's death 24:1-25:18

Abraham, according to custom, must arrange for the marriage of his son. Since he is old and near death, he entrusts this task to a servant, who functions more like a trusted

Scripture

Lesson Notes • Deacon Lázaro J. Ulloa

steward than a mere servant. In fact, the Hebrew name for such service is Shalia. Isaac is not permitted to travel to Abraham's native land as this would seem to be a move backward from God's promise of the land.

God intervenes in this journey and Rebekah is looked upon as God's choice for Isaac. Rebekah's brother Laban consents to the marriage, thus hinting that Rebekah's father is deceased. Laban's true greedy character will come to light later in the stories of Jacob. The story ends with the marriage and subsequent love. The order of marriage first and love second, reflects what was often the case with arranged marriages.

Before Abraham dies, he marries again to a woman named Keturah. Keturah, becomes the mother of the Arabian tribes that inhabited southern Palestine and Northwestern Arabia. The fact that Abraham achieves more descendants from his second wife puts to rest any possibility that Abraham was the infertile one and not Sarah.

Abraham dies after a full life. We find Ishmael present at his father's funeral. The chapter concludes with the Priestly genealogy of Ishmael, who becomes the father of twelve tribes that occupy the northwestern Arabian wilderness. The promise given to Abraham about Ishmael in Gn 21:13 is seen fulfilled.

Scripture

Lesson Notes • Deacon Lázaro J. Ulloa

THE JACOB CYCLE Gen 25:19-36:43

The birth of Esau and Jacob 25:19-26

The barrenness of Rebekah echoes that of Sarah, but its resolution is almost immediate. God intervenes and Rebekah becomes pregnant as did Sarah. The joy of the pregnancy quickly turns to despair at the struggle going on in the womb. By a series of implied and explicit word plays, the narrator underscores characteristics of Jacob and Esau that form a part of the future behavior and relationship of these two brothers and consequently, nations.

Esau sells his birthright 25:27-34

The tension between the two brothers is exemplified in their different vocations and further accentuated by Isaac's preferential love for Esau, and Rebekah's for Jacob. Esau is concerned only with immediate gratification and loses all sense of proportion, selling his birthright for a bowl of "red stuff". Jacob clearly takes advantage of his brother by pushing him not only to sell his birthright, but to make the deal irrevocable by forcing Esau to swear to it.

While the writer refrains from making explicit moral judgments, he does show that Jacob's actions will lead him away from home, penniless, and at the mercy of Laban. God's choice of Jacob remains a mystery, but from the moment God appears to Jacob, his character begins to improve.

The Blessing 27:1-46

The story of deception by which Jacob receives his brother's blessing is a masterful blend of the Yahwist and Elohist sources and virtually impossible to separate one source from the other.

When the scene opens and ends, each parent is with their favorite son (Isaac & Esau – Rebekah & Jacob). Only during the moment of the deception and blessing is the parent not with his or her favorite son.

Isaac, now old and blind, wants to bless Esau before he dies. In the ancient world, deathbed blessings were believed to be particularly effective, and the meal that was prepared and eaten prior to bestowal of the blessing had a sacral character. Rebekah overhears Isaac's wishes to bless Esau and devises a plan to have her favorite (Jacob) receive the blessing instead. Jacob's only fear is what will happen if he is caught.

By means of his line of questioning, Isaac fears he's being deceived. Only after smelling Esau's scent on Jacob is he convinced and proceed with the blessing. When Isaac and Esau are reunited and Jacob's deception is revealed, both father and son are greatly affected with shock and grief (verse 30). In the ancient world, it was believed that a blessing or a curse, once spoken, had a life of its own and thus could not be recalled. The blessing given to Jacob is irrevocable; Isaac can do nothing to recall it. Esau begs for

Scripture

Lesson Notes • Deacon Lázaro J. Ulloa

some type of blessing, and although Isaac tries to comply, his words sound more like a curse. Jacob's blessing and Esau's apparent "curse" reflect upon the brothers as representatives of their respective nations, Israel and Edom. Edom became a nation before Israel but was later conquered by David and became a vassal of Israel.

The narrator refrains from making a moral judgment on the deception and cannot condemn Jacob, for he knows him to be the inheritor of the promise. The narrator does, however, disapprove of Rebekah and Jacob's actions as he directs our sympathies to Esau as an innocent and aggrieved victim.

Jacob leaves to find a wife 27:46-28:9

This passage from the Priestly author makes reference to the issue of intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews. This was an especially acute problem during the period of restoration (after 538 B.C.E.) when Israel was concerned with the integrity of its religious practices and purity of race. Rebekah shows extreme dissatisfaction with Esau's marriages.

Jacob's dream at Bethel 28:10-22

This is a combination of Elohist and Yahwist sources, although the Elohist appears to dominate the passage. After fleeing Esau's wrath, Jacob finds himself at a shrine where he rests for the night. As is characteristic with the Elohist tradition, divine revelation comes in the form of a dream.

Jacob identifies his vision of the stairway as the "gateway to heaven" (verse 17). The ancient world believed that there were certain places on earth where the divine and the earthly realms met, and Bethel was considered one such place.

The Yahwist version uses the appearance of Yahweh as an opportunity to extend the promise of Abraham to Jacob. Yahweh is identified as the God of Abraham and Isaac, and assures Jacob of the divine presence and protection on the way. Yahweh is revealed as the God of the ancestors, committed to a family or a clan, and not bound to a specific place or land.

Bethel became an extremely important cultic center in ancient Israel (Amos 5:5, 7:10-13; Hos 10:5) and dominated Israel's cultic life in the north until it was destroyed during the period of Deuteronomistic reform (2 Kings 23:15).

Jacob's arrival in Haran 29:2-14

Jacob arrives at his ancestor's city and apparently congregates with shepherds around the same well that Abraham's servant did when acquiring a bride for Isaac. However, whereas Rebekah watered the servant's camels, it is Jacob who waters Laban's herd for Rachel, his future wife. Abraham's servant showers Laban with riches, but Jacob enters Laban's home penniless. Laban is apparently disappointed.

Scripture

Lesson Notes • Deacon Lázaro J. Ulloa

Jacob marries 29:15-30

Laban's question to Jacob: "should you serve me for nothing just because you are a relative of mine?" (verse 15) begins the crafty and devious dealings that will characterize the relationship between Laban and Jacob. At first glance, Laban's offer to pay Jacob sounds very generous. However, the reality is that Laban is declaring the bond of family (uncle-nephew) null and void. It is replaced by a lord-servant relationship.

Jacob suggests 7 years of labor for the hand of Rachel in marriage (this serves as the bride price—a custom meant to compensate the family for the loss of their daughter's labor through marriage). Laban's answer is ambiguous as he never says that he will give Rachel to Jacob; rather, he says that he prefers to give her to Jacob than to an outsider (verse 19). This lack of clarity becomes obvious later in the story.

When the time for payment comes, Laban gives his older daughter, Leah instead. Because of the marriage practices of the time it would be possible to complete this deception. Jacob, who deceived a blind man (his father Isaac) is himself deceived and treated as if he were blind. He is made to look even more foolish than Isaac, for he has sight and was yet easily deceived by Laban.

Laban says that it is against their custom to give the younger before the first-born which must be meant as a direct affront to Jacob, who, though younger, usurped the position of the first-born by gaining his brother's birthright and blessing. Laban then suggests that at the end of the week-long marriage festivities, Jacob can marry Rachel, on the condition that he will continue to work for him for another 7 years. Destined to be a ruler, Jacob remains a servant in his uncle's home.

Birth and naming of Jacob's children 29:31-30:24

Yahwist and Elohist sources joined.

Laban has created a situation in which Jacob finds himself married to 2 women, only one of whom he loves. God controls the course of events by making Leah fruitful and Rachel barren. Jacob's role in the story is largely confined to fathering children.

The paradox of the story centers on the position of the two women. Leah, first-born, first wife, and first mother, should have the love and recognition of her husband, but Jacob loves the younger. Rachel, though loved, is barren and fears the loss of Jacob's love. With each son that Leah bears, Rachel becomes more and more desperate. Jacob reminds Rachel that it is God who gives children. Consequently, Rachel's struggle is not only for love but also for the favor of God. Rachel, like Sarah before her (chapter 16), finally becomes a mother through her maid. In the end, Rachel becomes pregnant through God's intervention. It is interesting to note that God remembers Rachel only after she has granted Leah access to Jacob's bed.

Of Jacob's daughters, only Dinah is mentioned probably in anticipation of her story in chapter 34. The birth of Benjamin is not included here but postponed until 35:17,

Scripture

Lesson Notes • Deacon Lázaro J. Ulloa

possibly because Rachel dies in childbirth and her death would be out of context in this chapter.

Jacob acquires great wealth 30:25-43

This is primarily the work of the Yahwist.

Jacob has learned his lesson well, and now he attempts to outwit Laban. Jacob requests permission to leave. Laban, who wants Jacob to continue working for him, ignores the request. But he admits that he has benefited from Jacob's service and asks what wages Jacob wants. Jacob ignores Laban's question and asserts his intention to provide for his own household.

As payment for services, Jacob will take the dark sheep and speckled goats, which would have been very few animals. (sheep were generally all white and goats black) Laban agrees but seeks to undercut any loss by removing all abnormally colored animals from the flock and pasturing them a distance of three days journey from Jacob's herd. The distance between the flocks works against Laban, for it gives Jacob a chance to carry out his plan unobserved.

Jacob's breeding practices are based on the ancient belief that what a mother experiences while pregnant is transmitted to the fetus. Jacob sets up tree branches that he has cut in order to expose their white center. The black goat looks upon these branches while mating, and the white from the inner core of the branch is transferred to their offspring and so produce speckled offspring. He makes the white sheep look at the dark goats in order to achieve the same results. He purposely uses only the best animals for his selective breeding, leaving Laban with a flock of weak and inferior animals. Jacob, the one deceived (verse 29) becomes the deceiver once again.

Jacob prepares to leave Laban and covenant 31:1-32:3

God has protected Jacob from Laban's double dealing, caused him to succeed in gaining great wealth and now commands him to return to his home. Jacob seeks to justify his actions before his wives. Throughout the entire story, the writer implies that Jacob is not free to leave his father-in-law with his wife and children. It could be possible that Jacob's marriage was in the ancient Near East tradition of adoption marriage, where basically Jacob would be considered an adopted son of Laban, and his wife and children Laban's property.

Jacob's flight takes place while Laban is occupied with the annual sheep shearing. Jacob's action is paralleled by Rachel's theft of her father's household gods in verse 19. The reason of Rachel's theft is unclear. According to Nuzi documents, the household gods represent the credentials of the true heir. It's possible that:

1. Rachel is trying to secure a future claim to any inheritance
2. She may be trying to derive prosperity and blessing from the gods.

Scripture

Lesson Notes • Deacon Lázaro J. Ulloa

Whatever the case, it seems ironic that the author would place Rachel in such a bad light.

Laban is placed in a very awkward situation. He tries to overtake Jacob and is ready to do battle to reclaim his property but can only fuss and fume after God's warning to him in a dream to not harm Jacob. Although Laban can do nothing about Jacob's departure, he does not ignore the theft of his household gods. Jacob denies any knowledge of the theft and unwittingly pronounces Rachel's death sentence.

The image of the menstruating Rachel sitting on the household gods is ironic, since the gods were revered as sacred and yet are being protected by the "unclean" taboo associated with blood. Whatever the significance of these gods, the author is definitely trying his best to ridicule them and the pagan belief and worship of idols.

Jacob gains an advantage when Laban cannot find his gods. Jacob details his loyal service over Laban's shabby treatment. Laban is not impressed with Jacob's speech and continues to assert his ownership of Jacob's wives, children, and flocks, but he can do nothing because of God's warning.

Laban and Jacob eventually reach an agreement. Both the Yahwist and Elohist authors present their own versions.

Yahwist non-aggression pact between Aram and Israel. The sign of the covenant is a mound of stones and the covenant is sealed with a meal.

Elohist a boundary agreement between Aram and Israel. The sign of the covenant is a memorial stone and the covenant is ratified with a sacrifice and a meal.

In the Yahwist story, the name Gilead is a play on the Hebrew word for "Mound of Stones"

In the Elohist story, the name Mizpah sounds like the Hebrew word for "Memorial Stone".

Preparing to meet Esau, wrestling with God, and the meeting with Esau 32:4-33:20

(Yahwist) Jacob now sends messengers to Esau hoping to gain his favor. When the messengers report that Esau is coming with 400 men, Jacob is understandably alarmed and divides his camp in order to avoid total disaster. Jacob then turns to God in prayer, which shows his state of anxiety and reminds God of his promise. In the Elohist account of this story, Jacob tries to appease his brother with many gifts.

The story of Jacob "wrestling with a man" takes place after Jacob has sent his wives, children, and possessions across the river and is alone. Jacob is attacked by a "man" and he struggles with him until dawn. The "man" does not prevail and resorts to wounding

Scripture

Lesson Notes • Deacon Lázaro J. Ulloa

Jacob. Jacob demands a blessing but is given a new name instead (Israel). The mysterious man never gives his name but is eventually identified as God (verse 31). Jacob is surprised to have seen God and survive.

The story incorporates elements from very ancient sources. Appeasing a “river-god” in order to be allowed to cross a river is found in ancient folklore. Other elements of ancient folklore are present by they fail to explain the relationship with this story and the rest of the Jacob Cycle. However, Jacob’s struggle is remembered by means of his new name – Israel – which, in popular etymology means “one who contends with God”. The story somehow accounts for the dietary rule that prohibited Israelites from eating the sciatic nerve in memory of Jacob’s wounded thigh. This law, though, was not observed and is not recorded in the Old Testament.

The greatest interest in this story though is that Jacob will never be the same after this encounter. Jacob’s character is profoundly changed by this experience. From this moment until his death, Jacob will be person of honor and integrity and his life will reveal the people of Israel’s own struggle with God.

When Jacob finally confronts Esau, the meeting turns out to be rather anticlimactic. Jacob’s extensive preparations and subservient gestures prove effective. Esau has apparently no desire to kill his brother and in fact expresses great joy at seeing his brother again. However, the brother’s conversation suggests that neither really trusts the other. Jacob will not allow Esau or his men to accompany him. Instead of following Esau, Jacob goes in another direction and moves on to Schechem where he buys land and sets up a memorial stone to the God of Israel (El).

End of the Jacob Cycle 35:1-36:43

The chapter is comprised of all three sources: the Elohist source includes the story of Jacob’s fulfillment of his vow to build an altar at Bethel and the story of the birth of Benjamin. The Priestly summarizes the life of Jacob (v. 9-15), the list of Jacob’s sons and the death of Isaac. The Yahwist contributes a brief note about Ruben (v. 22a)

Jacob returns to Bethel on a direct command from God to fulfill the vow he took on his first visit to that city. Jacob’s journey appears to be a pilgrimage and may reflect actual practices later associated with pilgrimages in Israel. The ritual purification before leaving on a pilgrimage includes a formal renunciation of foreign gods and anything associated with pagan cults, such as earrings, which were cultic symbols, and amulets. Changing one’s clothes is a common religious symbol of renewal. The “terror from God” that protects the family is a kind of inexplicable paralysis or panic that renders the enemy incapable of attack (see 1 Sam 14:15; Exod 23:27; Josh 10:10).

The birth of Benjamin (v. 17) is the fulfillment of Rachel’s prayer when Joseph was born (30:24). Jacob renames the child Benjamin which, means “Son of my right hand” and/or

Scripture

Lesson Notes • Deacon Lázaro J. Ulloa

“southerners” because in the ancient world it was thought that there was a mysterious relationship between a name and its bearer (the name would determine the destiny of the bearer). Rather than mark the life of the child by the sorrow surrounding his birth, Jacob wisely gives the child a name that suggests an honorable and successful future. The site of Rachel’s tomb is unknown. (1 Sam 10:2 and Jer 31:15 places Rachel’s tomb in the territory of Benjamin, north of Jerusalem, thus Ephrath cannot be Bethlehem – located in the territory of the tribe of Judah and south of Jerusalem – as stated in v. 19).

The Priestly author mentions only what is theologically important, like changing Jacob’s name to Israel (v. 10), and repeating the promise given to Abraham (v. 11-12). The list of Jacob’s sons given by the Priestly author is consistent with other lists of the Old Testament but conflicts with the story of the birth of Benjamin in verses 16-20. For the Priestly author the birth of Benjamin takes place in Mesopotamia while Jacob is still living with Laban and not in Canaan. Both Jacob and Esau are present at Isaac’s burial just as Isaac and Ishmael were present at Abraham’s burial.

The Jacob cycle ends with an insertion of the descendants of Esau. The genealogy is actually composed of six distinct lists:

1. v. 1-8
2. v. 9-14
3. v. 15-19
4. v. 20-30
5. v. 31-39
6. v. 40-43

It’s difficult to determine the historical reliability of any of these lists as all differ from each other.

The patriarchal sagas begin with a call to venture forth to a strange land with nothing more than a promise. Israel saw in Abraham’s journey its own call to go forth trusting in God, and in his faith a testimony to its own faith. Even in the questionable behavior of Jacob, Israel saw its own history, but more important, Israel saw in these stories God’s intervention. God did not choose perfect people, but people who were willing to listen and follow.

Scripture

Lesson Notes • Deacon Lázaro J. Ulloa

THE STORY OF JOSEPH Gen 37:1-50:26

The Joseph story is set apart from the other narratives in Genesis by its distinctive literary form. It is often referred to as a novelette because it is a unified whole from beginning to end. Its main theme is peace in the family. There is a general agreement that the story has been influenced by the wisdom tradition of Israel. One of the concerns of the wisdom tradition was the success of the individual in life, which was achieved by diligence and self-discipline. It was important to learn appropriate behavior, self-control, and propriety in speech, along with fear of God. Joseph embodies all of these characteristics and is presented as a model of wisdom.

Contrast Between Joseph and Previous Patriarchs

The former Patriarchal Narratives are made up of pieces of relatively small self-contained units. On the other hand, the Joseph Story has a continuous, well-turned plot. It is marked with deep psychological insights into the characters and makes effective use of a knowledge of Egyptian ways. Unlike Abraham, and Jacob and Isaac stories, there are no theophanies; God is at work, but through the actions, even the sins, of human beings. For the most part, the action of God is characterized by “radical secrecy, distance, and unrecognizableness” (G. von Rad, *God at Work in Israel* [Nash, 1980] 34)

The divine promises of land and posterity that are renewed to the earlier patriarchs are not given to Joseph as a bearer of the promise. Joseph became the means of preserving the family in a foreign country, but also the means by which a new threat to the promise of the land was realized. Joseph saves the family, but at the expense of the land. The story does, however, answer the question of how Jacob/Israel came to Egypt with his family.

Joseph Sold into Slavery 37:1-36

A tension undoubtedly exists between Joseph and his brothers. All three sources give their reason for this hostility:

- Priestly: Joseph brings “bad reports” of his brothers to Jacob, although the content of the report is not mentioned.
- Yahwist: Jacob’s partiality to Joseph, demonstrated by the long tunic.
- Elohist: The dreams of the brothers bowing before Joseph.
The science of dream interpretation developed to assist in deciphering a dream. Ancient cultures held that in some dreams there was a foreshadowing of the future, and this is the sense in which these dreams are to be understood.

Joseph is sent on an errand by Jacob to his brothers who are pasturing their flocks. The contradictions in the episode are immediately evident:

Scripture

Lesson Notes • Deacon Lázaro J. Ulloa

Yahwist: The brothers plot to kill Joseph, but Judah intercedes and the brothers decide to sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites.

Elohist: The brothers plot to kill Joseph, but Reuben intercedes and the brothers place Joseph in a cistern. Reuben hopes to later save his brother, but Medianite traders find Joseph and bring him to Egypt.

The brothers return with a plot to deceive their father Jacob who becomes grief stricken. Instead of ending on such a tragic note, the scene shifts to Egypt and the sale of Joseph to Potiphar, an official of Pharaoh's court.

Judah and Tamar 38:1-30

This narrative presents the problem of interrupting the Joseph Story. It is probably inserted because of the importance of the tribe of Judah in Israel's history. In any case, it permits the narrator to contrast the lives of Joseph and Judah; at the same time, it gives Joseph time to journey into Egypt.

Judah separates from his brothers, marries a Canaanite woman, and has three sons who reach marital age very quickly. Er, the eldest son marries Tamar, a Canaanite woman. For some unknown reason, he displeases God and dies. According to the Levirate Law (Deut 25:5-10), Er's brother must marry his widow because Er died without fathering children. The first son of this union would be legally recognized as the heir of the deceased brother. Obeying the law, Judah gives his second son, Onan, to Tamar. Onan is unwilling to raise up a son for his brother and does not complete the sexual act. Onan dies because he refused to fulfill his obligation to his brother. After losing two sons, Judah does not give his third son to Tamar, thereby breaking the Levirate Law.

After the death of his wife, Judah journeys to Timnah, where Tamar takes advantage of the situation by disguising herself as a prostitute, and seducing Judah. As a guarantee of payment, Tamar requests that Judah leave his seal and cord, and staff. Later, when Judah sends his servant with payment, Tamar cannot be found, and Judah drops the matter rather than continue the search and risk embarrassment.

Tamar conceives a child by Judah and her pregnancy is made known to Judah. Judah, having jurisdiction on this matter because Tamar is betrothed to his third son, sentences her to death – the punishment for adultery – but at the crucial moment, she produces Judah's seal and cord and staff, identifying him as the father. Judah admits his fault and exonerates Tamar.

Scripture

Lesson Notes • Deacon Lázaro J. Ulloa

Rise and Fall of Joseph 39:1-40:23

After arriving in Egypt, Joseph is sold into slavery. He soon rises to a position of trust and the Egyptian is blessed with prosperity because of him. This will soon change, as Joseph is seduced by his master's wife. Joseph rejects her advances because adultery would be a misuse of his master's trust, and a sin against God. The woman falsely accuses him of seduction and Joseph again is facing a life and death situation. Previously, instead of being put to death he is sold into slavery – now, instead of death he is put in prison. Despite these apparent set-backs, Joseph will again rise to prominence. Throughout the story there is an underlying tone that God is the one directing Joseph's life.

While in jail, Joseph notices that two prisoners (the royal cupbearer and baker) are distressed over a series of dreams that no one can seem to interpret. Joseph dismisses their problem by stating that dream interpretation belongs only to God. However, after hearing their dreams, Joseph proceeds to interpret them. Both the cupbearer and the baker will have their heads lifted up: the cupbearer will be reinstated into Pharaoh's court, but the baker will be put to death. Though Joseph asks the cupbearer to remember him before Pharaoh, the cupbearer forgets until Pharaoh himself dreams, and Joseph will remain in prison for two more years.

Interpretation of Pharaoh's Dreams 41:1-57

Pharaoh's dreams cannot be interpreted by any of the magicians and sages of Egypt. The cupbearer remembers Joseph and he is brought before Pharaoh to interpret the dreams. Joseph again says that dream interpretation comes from God, and proceeds to interpret the dreams, which are shown to come true by the end of the chapter. Seven good years, represented by fat cows and healthy ears of grain, will be followed by seven devastating years of famine, depicted as gaunt, ugly cows and shriveled ears of grain. Joseph follows his interpretation with practical advice, which Pharaoh immediately accepts.

Joseph is installed as master of the palace and vizier and has administration over all the land. The ceremony of installation reflects the political and social customs of Egypt. The signet ring was the royal seal kept by the vizier, and the gold chain was probably a ceremonial emblem of office. The robes of fine linen and the chariots indicate Joseph's noble status. Joseph is completely drawn into Egyptian culture. He is given an Egyptian name: Zaphenath-paneah, which means God speaks and lives, and marries an Egyptian woman. During this time, Joseph has two sons Manasseh and Ephraim.

Joseph and His Brothers 42:1-45:28

After Joseph's rise to power, the story again focuses on the relationship between Joseph and his brothers. The famine has spread to Palestine, causing Jacob to send his sons to Egypt in search of food. He does not send Benjamin, Rachel's other son, who has apparently replaced Joseph in his father's affection.

Scripture

Lesson Notes • Deacon Lázaro J. Ulloa

Joseph's dreams are fulfilled when his brothers bow before him. Because they do not recognize him, he begins to play a game with them, the object of which will become clear as the story unfolds. After being accused of spying, the brothers reveal to Joseph what he wants to know about his family. He insists that they bring Benjamin to him to prove the truth of their claim that they are not spies. Joseph is trying to determine whether or not his brothers have changed. They had subjected Joseph to an unknown fate; now he does the same to them. Joseph keeps his brother Simeon in prison as guarantee that the brothers will return. When the brothers return home, they recount their story to their father Jacob who again laments for his favorite son.

The hopelessness of their situation and Judah's vow to assure Benjamin's safety convinces Jacob to allow Benjamin to accompany his other sons to Egypt. On their return to Egypt, a banquet has been prepared for them. Upon seeing Benjamin, Joseph is overcome with emotion and must leave the room to regain control. The seriousness of the game Joseph is playing is seen in the final test of his brothers. He has a silver cup put in Benjamin's bag. Joseph's steward overtakes the brothers shortly after departing and they are accused of theft. The brothers vow death for the thief and slavery to the rest if the cup is found in their possession. The steward rejects their offer and gives slavery for the thief and freedom for the rest. By isolating Benjamin from his brothers, Joseph wants to see whether or not they will allow Benjamin to be enslaved in order to save themselves.

When the cup is found, Judah gives an impassionate speech admitting their guilt. Judah sees in their present situation God's judgment for what they had done to Joseph. Until now, they had escaped detection and punishment. Judah asks to take Benjamin's place for fear of his father's grief. Through Judah's speech and actions, Joseph learns that his brothers have indeed changed. The climax has come, Joseph must now act. He is overcome with emotion and reveals himself. The underlying theology of the story is made clear when Joseph states that "God has sent me here ahead of you" (45:5) – thus recognizing that God has directed and guided the course of events. What the brothers meant as evil, God has redeemed. God is the one who sent Joseph to Egypt to preserve a remnant of Jacob's family.

The terms "remnant" and "deliverance" become important Old Testament terms expressing Israel's conviction that God intervenes in its history and preserves it from total destruction.

The brothers return home and tell Jacob that Joseph still lives. Jacob is understandably dumbfounded but accepts their claim and decides to go to Egypt. No mention is made of the brother's guilty deed, for it has been superseded by God's saving intervention.

Scripture

Lesson Notes • Deacon Lázaro J. Ulloa

Migration into Egypt 46:1-47:26

All three sources (Yahwist, Elohist, and Priestly) are present in the final scenes of the Joseph Story.

Yahwist: Jacob decides to go to Egypt (46:2-6)

Elohist: Trip to Egypt is in response to God's command (46:2-4)

The Elohist account shifts the focus of the story from the relationship between the brothers to Jacob's descent into Egypt, and incorporates the Joseph Story into the larger picture of Israel's history as preparation for the Exodus.

According to the Priestly account, Benjamin, who was a child in the Joseph story, now has ten children. Benjamin's genealogy appears to be a summary of the genealogy found in the book of Numbers 26. The number "seventy" for the descendants of Jacob found in verse 27 is arrived at only by including Jacob himself and Dinah among the descendents. The purpose of this genealogy is not clear. It interrupts the story, which resumes in verse 28. The long awaited meeting between Joseph and his father presents a moving picture.

The final scene of the story takes up the practical consideration of where Jacob and his family will settle in Egypt. The fact that Joseph is a very skilled diplomat is evident in the instructions he gives Jacob and his brothers in preparation for the meeting with Pharaoh. Joseph's insistence that the family represent themselves as shepherds is meant to assure Pharaoh of their peaceful intentions as well as to indicate that Goshen would be suitable pastureland away from the city. Verse 34 claims that shepherds are abhorrent to the Egyptians, but there is no extrabiblical support for such a claim, although distrust did exist between settled people and nomads.

The family is given Goshen as the place to settle and Pharaoh suggests that they be appointed superintendents of the royal herds (v. 5a). Finally, Jacob describes his life to Pharaoh as a "wayfarer", a term often used in the patriarchal narratives to describe the lifestyle of the patriarchs, for whom the possession of the land is given only in promise.

Joseph's land policies during the period of famine enabled the Egyptians to survive only by selling their land to Pharaoh and becoming serfs. This situation describes accurately the decline of the free peasantry in Egypt. However, the story is remembered because of the picture of Joseph that it presents. He is a wise and capable administrator, able to deal effectively with each new crisis.

Blessings and The Death of Jacob 47:29-50:14

Jacob's request to be buried with his ancestors in Canaan signified a bond with the ancestors. In addition, burial in Canaan represents a claim to the land and anticipates the day of his descendant's return from Egypt.

Scripture

Lesson Notes • Deacon Lázaro J. Ulloa

Jacob's adoption of Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh is meant to show how these two became tribal leaders even though they were not the natural sons of Jacob. By adoption, Jacob makes them full members of the family (Israel) and equal to the other tribes. Early in its history (Judges 5; Num 26:5-51), the tribe of Joseph split into the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, which settled in the Samaritan mountains and became powerful tribes of the northern kingdom. The other blessings given by Jacob on his death-bed are a rather haphazard collection of sayings about the characteristics and future destiny of the twelve tribes.

Jacob's body is embalmed apparently to preserve the body for the long trip to Canaan, and has no apparent religious significance. The long mourning period and the presence of high Egyptian officials in the funeral procession suggest that Jacob was given a kingly funeral. According to the Yahwist tradition, Jacob was buried in Transjordan. According to the Priestly, he was buried in the cave of Machpelah, the burial site of Abraham and Sara.

Joseph's Death 50:15-26

In the final scene of the Joseph story, the brothers fear that Joseph will take revenge upon them now that their father is dead. However, the underlying theology of the story is clear: what they meant for evil, God meant for good. Joseph insists that what they did to him has been overshadowed and redeemed by God's saving will. They were instruments in God's plan for the salvation of Israel.

Joseph's final words about the land of promise are significant as they indicate that though this story ends in a foreign land, the promise given by God to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will be fulfilled. The end of Genesis points to the destiny of Israel: they are to become the liberated people of Yahweh.