

THE STORY OF ABRAHAM AND THE DEBATE OVER THE SOURCE HYPOTHESIS*

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Erhard Blum has proposed in a recent study of Genesis 12-50 that a key stage of its composition contained the following version of the story of Abraham: Gen 12:1-4a, 6-20; 13:1-18; 16:1-8, 11-14; 18:1-16, 20-22a; 33b-19:28, 30-38; (21:1-7*); 21:8-21; 22:1-14, 19.¹ Blum argues, against Gerhard von Rad, Martin Noth and Hans Walter Wolff, that this stage of composition can in no way be identified with a Yahwist from the period of the united monarchy. Instead it is the product of successive stages of redaction, is of exilic provenance, and does not reach beyond the book of Genesis.² Furthermore Gen 12:1-3 is not the programmatic theological statement that von Rad and Wolff in particular alleged it to be, nor does it function as a fulcrum between the story of creation and the story of Israel. Blum arrives at this conclusion by tracing the composition of Genesis 12-50—with due acknowledgement of Gunkel—from the smallest identifiable literary forms to the larger more complex blocks of text.

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¹Erhard Blum, *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte* (WMANT 57; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1984) 297-339. This stage of composition is described as *Vätergeschichte 2* (Vg2). Blum thinks there was an older account of the birth of Isaac which was replaced (21:1-7*). The present text does not fulfill the conditions of the Lord's return outlined in 18:10, 14 (p. 279).

²Key stages of composition were: a *Jacob erzählung* from the united monarchy (25:21-34*; 27:1-45; 28:11-13aa, 16-19; 29:1-31:46, 51, 53*; 32:2a); a *Kompositions-Schicht* of northern provenance (preceding text plus 28:20-22; 32:2b-9, 14-33:17, and embellishment of the birth stories of 31); a *Jacobgeschichte* (a Joseph Story in 37*; 39-45; 46:5b, 28-33; 47*; 50:1-11, 14-21, linked to the K-Schicht via 41:50-52 and 48); a *Vätergeschichte 1* (Vg1) (Jacobgeschichte joined with an early Abraham story after the northern exile [13:2-13, 18; 18:1-15, 16, 20-22a, 33b; 19:1-28, 30-38; a now lost version of 21:1-7] via 13:14-17 and 28:13aβb-14a); a *Vätergeschichte 2* (addition of 12:1-20*; 16*; 21:8-21; 22*; 26:1a-3bα, 6-33; 28:14b; 46:1-5a. The exilic Vg2 was subsequently linked to other tradition complexes by dtg redaction.

My own study has led to quite different results. This paper will be concerned with pointing out the areas of disagreement with Blum over the composition of the text, outlining the results of my analysis, and the arguments in support of them. Limitations of space necessitate focusing on the story of Abraham. In examining the compositional process my procedure has been essentially the same as Blum's, namely to identify the smallest building blocks and trace the development of the text from these. In tracing this development to the stage introduced by Gen 12:1-3 I have tried, as best one can in an exegetical environment so influenced by the source hypothesis, to set aside any notion of a Yahwist.³

The text that I would identify as belonging to the stage of composition introduced by Gen 12:1-3 is provided in the structural outline below. In agreement with Blum the Abraham-Lot story in Genesis 13; 18-19 is the oldest layer and served as the basic building block for the subsequent additions. It is possible the story of the announcement of a son to Abraham and Sarah was originally independent of the story of the rescue of Lot from Sodom, but attempts to recover two such stories from the present text are not convincing.⁴ It is safer to regard 18:1-15 as part of a larger story of Abraham and Lot, with a version of their separation in Genesis 13 as its introduction.⁵ The second observation draws support from the way 18:1 can follow smoothly after 13:18.

³Despite my disagreements with Blum I would regard his book as one of the most informative and challenging studies of Genesis 12-50 to have appeared in recent years.

⁴Cf. for example J. Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1975) 202-8. He separates Gen 18:1-15 from Genesis 19 by the removal of the 'heavenly visitor' section in 18:1b-9. To justify this however Van Seters is obliged to appeal to extra biblical parallels, in the Asklepios cult.

⁵The story might be traceable back to Gen 12:1 if V. Maag's proposal that this was the beginning of an old account of Abraham's transmigration were acceptable (cf. "Der Hirte Israels [Eine Skizze von Wesen und Bedeutung der Väterreligion]," *SThU* 28 [1958] 2-28, and "Malkut Yhwh," *VTSup.* 7 [1960] 129-53). However the promise in 12:1b is about the land which the Lord will show Abraham. In my judgment this is fulfilled in 13:14-17, a text which moreover combines land and descendants. Hence it is difficult to separate 12:1 from 12:2-3. As well, the account of Abraham's journeying is carefully arranged with 12:1-3 and 13:14-17 in mind. This point will be developed further below. C. Westermann gives some support to Maag's proposal (*Genesis 12-36* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985] 147-48), as does the more recent study by E. Ruprecht, "Vorgegebene Tradition und theologische Gestaltung in Genesis XII 1-3," *VT* 29 (1979) 171-88.

One could reasonably expect that Gen 19:30-38 was originally followed by an account of the birth of Isaac. Unfortunately the present account in 21:1-7 cannot simply be identified with this, as it is a combination of some older elements in vv 1-2, 6-7, framing a block of priestly material in vv 3-5. Reconstructing an original account from these older elements is difficult, but I would suggest that its basic outline can be discerned in vv 1a, 2a, 7.⁶

Gen 12:10-20 and 16:1-14* are both widely regarded as originally independent stories which have been inserted into the narrative.⁷ The journey of Abraham away from the Bethel site in 12:8 to the Negeb, and his return to the Negeb in 13:1 and the Bethel site in 13:3, is so arranged to accommodate the story of his sojourn in Egypt. This indicates that the redactor responsible for the insertion of this story composed the report of Abraham's journey in 12:4-9*. As will be pointed out below in the discussion of the structure of the story of Abraham, this report was constructed with 12:1 clearly in mind. Hence it is most likely that the same redactor was also responsible for 12:1-3.

Genesis 16 has been inserted between 13:18 and 18:1, texts which were originally contiguous.⁸ However I would note that Genesis 16 does not describe any journey by Abraham or Sarah. One can presume therefore that the redactor intended this story to take place at Hebron (13:18). Genesis 16 is closely related to Gen 18:1-15 via the theme of a son for Abraham and Sarah. This of course does not in itself reveal to which stage of the composition of the story it belongs. Because the chapter does not have the same literary seams evident between 12:10-20 and its surrounding context, the proposal that it belongs to the same stage of composition emerges chiefly from a consideration of structure and the function of this text within the structure.

The other passage that forms part of the composition introduced by Gen 12:1-3 is 13:14-17. Blum identifies 13:14-17 and its parallel in

⁶ As pointed out above Blum judges that Gen 21:1-7 does not fulfil the conditions of 18:10, 14 (p. 279). His arguments are less than convincing. It is not clear that 18:10, 14 speaks of a divine visit after the birth of Sarah's child, and his appeal to greater similarity between 21:1-7 and 17:16a, 17, 19, 21 overlooks the evidence in support of a literary critical analysis in 21:1-7.

⁷ On Gen 12:10-20 see. Blum, *Die Komposition*, 307-11; Van Seters, *Abraham*, 167-71; Westermann, *Genesis*, 161. On Genesis 16 see Blum, 317; Van Seters, 192-96; Westermann, 236-37.

⁸ Van Seters relocates Gen 13:18 after 16:1-12 in his pre-Yahwistic stage of composition. While this does ease the problem of the non-mention of Abraham in Gen 18:1 it creates a too abrupt transition from 16:12 to 13:18 (*Abraham*, 313).

28:13aβb-14a as an earlier stage of composition than 12:1-3. This is possible. What he does not see however is the integral relationship between Gen 12:1-3 and 13:14-17. This I believe is due to his conviction that Gen 12:1-3 introduces a stage of redaction (Vg2) characterised by a series of texts which contain a divine command with respect to a journey. The relevant texts are Gen 22:1-2; 26:1-3 (command preventing a proposed journey); 31:11-13 and 46:1-5a.⁹ Closer inspection indicates that Blum is incorrect in assigning Gen 12:1-3; 22:1-2; 26:1-3 and 46:1-5a to the same hand. In terms of form Gen 12:1-3 is significantly different to 22:1-2 and 46:1-5a. Each of these commences with the divine call, the naming of the addressee, and the addressee's response ("Here am I"). Gen 12:1-3 does not have these elements. Gen 26:1-3 for its part differs from both of these introductions. It states that the Lord appeared to Isaac and spoke. As such it is closest to the formulation of Gen 12:7. In terms of language there are also significant differences. Blum notes that Gen 46:3, along with other texts from his Vg2 (Gen 21:13, 18), refer like Gen 12:2 to the promise of a great nation. However Gen 21:13, 18 and 46:3 all use the verb *šim* whereas Gen 12:2 employs *ʿāsā*.¹⁰ There is a strong thematic association between 26:1-3 and Gen 46:1-5a. But the formulation of each introduction is quite different, making it difficult to accept that they came from the same hand. While 26:1-3 is not the same as 12:1-3 they are closer to each other than to 22:1-2 and 46:1-5a.

On the basis of these observations it seems unlikely Gen 12:1-3 can be the beginning of Blum's Vg2 narrative, and there is also some doubt as to whether 26:1-3 should be included. The position of this paper is that 12:1-3 is in fact the introduction to a well planned and coherent narrative, in which 13:14-17 has a key function. The integral nature of the relationship between 12:1-3 and 13:14-17 leads me to assign them (along with 28:13aβb-14) to the same stage of composition of the text.¹¹

⁹ Gen 31:11-13 stems from the earlier K-Schicht, and was probably used as a model for the composition of 46:1-5a (and Gen 22:1-2). The structural similarities are close. But whereas 31:11-13 has only the context of the Jacob story in mind 46:1-5a, with its references to the story of Isaac in Genesis 26, commands a larger horizon (Blum, *Die Komposition*, 246-47).

¹⁰The verb *šim* does occur in 13:16, a text which I would assign to the same stage of composition as 12:1-3. However it is not used in conjunction with nation but with "you and your descendants (seed)". The verb *ʿāsā* does not occur in conjunction with seed in Genesis (cf. Gen 32:13).

¹¹While R. Rendtorff (*Das überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch* [BZAW 147; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1976] 42-43) has made a valuable observation about the way the promise of descendants varies between "to you", "to you and your seed" and "to your seed", these need to be seen in context before they are assigned to different authors. Thus Gen 28:14a

The verses omitted from Genesis 12-13; 16; 18-19 are 12:4b-5, 7; 13:2, 11b, 12ab_a; 16:9-10; 15-16; 18:17-19, 22b-33a; 19:29; 21:1b, 2b, 3-6. Comment will be restricted to those that are more significant in relation to the proposed text. Within Genesis 12 the most significant omission is v 7, which I would judge to be a subsequent addition for three reasons. First, the formulation of the promise is closest to 15:18 and it is increasingly recognised that the language and theology of Genesis 15 place it within the orbit of the dtn/dtr movement.¹² Second, it is somewhat surprising that in 13:3-4 Abraham does not return to Shechem where the Lord had appeared to him, especially since 13:4 reports that he called on the name of the Lord. The third reason for omitting 12:7 is based on an assessment of the overall structure and meaning of the text introduced by 12:1-3, to which we shall shortly turn.

An examination of Genesis 16 shows that v 9 is in tension with vv 11-12, which do not envisage Hagar's return to Abraham's household. Yet these verses are essential for the integrity of the story, whereas v 9 is not. As Westermann observes, the verse appears to have an eye on Gen 21:8-21 where Hagar and Ishmael are again part of the household.¹³ Gen 16:10 also creates tension with v 11 in that a promise of descendants precedes the promise of a son. Finally, the formulation of v 10—"I will multiply your seed"—is identical to 22:17, itself an addition to Genesis 22. The evidence is therefore firmly in favour of regarding Gen 16:9-10 as a later addition to the story of Hagar, and to the proposed story of Abraham introduced by 12:1-3.

In agreement with Blum Gen 18:20-21, 22a, 33b provides the original link between the visit of the three men to Abraham and Sarah, and their subsequent rescue of Lot. Whereas Gen 18:20-21 raises the issue of the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah and so prepares for the dramatic

requires the mention only of "your seed", and although "to your seed" in v 13b is in an unusual location after the verb, it provides a suitable transition to v 14a. Contextual considerations—the way 13:14-17 follows the sequence of Lot's actions in 13:10-12—also indicate that 13:17 ("to you") should not be separated from 13:15 ("to you and your seed"). Gen 13:14-17 is best taken as a unit. On the importance of contextual consideration of these promises see J. A. Emerton, "The Origin of the Promises to The Patriarchs in the Older Sources of The Book of Genesis," *VT* 32 (1982) 14-32, in particular pp. 25-26. However Emerton goes too far in rejecting Rendtorff's proposals.

¹²Westermann (*Genesis*, 154-55) regards Gen 12:7 as an independent unit. This is rejected by Blum (*Die Komposition*, 333, n. 9) who nevertheless notes that the formulation of the promise in 12:7 is found elsewhere only in dtn/dtr passages (p. 383).

¹³Westermann, *Genesis*, 244.

account in chapter 19, 18:17-19 focus on Abraham and his future generations. The link between these distinct themes, v 17, is really the bare minimum required for maintaining an overall narrative sequence in the present text.¹⁴ Gen 18:22b-33a maintains the concern in vv 17-19 about justice and righteousness, seeking to defend the "way of the Lord" (v 19) in destroying Sodom and Gomorrah. As both Westermann and Blum point out the passage does not portray Abraham as an intercessor on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah. Rather the function of Abraham's questions is to show that the divine decision is a just one.¹⁵

Apart from Gen 21:8-21 and 22:1-14, 19 therefore, my proposed narrative is the same as Blum's Vg2 for the story of Abraham.¹⁶ We can now turn to a discussion of the programmatic statement in Gen 12:1-3 and how the subsequent narrative functions in relation to it.

GEN 12:1-3

This passage begins with a divine command to Abraham to leave his home, followed by three key promises. The first promise, that the Lord will show Abraham the land (v 1b), is formulated as an integral part of the command. The purpose of such a formulation will emerge from a consideration of the subsequent narrative of Abraham's execution of the command. The second promise is that the Lord will make Abraham a great nation (v 2a), while the third is that the Lord will bless him (vv

¹⁴Against Westermann, *Genesis*, 287. Cf. also Van Seters, *Abraham*, 212-13. Although Gen 18:18 refers to the theme of blessing for all as in 12:3 it uses different terminology to describe the recipients of blessing. As well v 19 introduces a conditional element into the promise.

¹⁵Westermann, *Genesis*, 286-87; Blum, *Die Komposition*, 403-5. Parallel examples of this theological concern come from such exilic and post-exilic passages as Jer 8:7-10 (dtr); Ezek 14:12-20; Job; and Jonah 3-4.

¹⁶Limitations of space prevent a full justification of the omission of Genesis 14; 15; 17; 20; 21:8-34; 22-24. Genesis 14 has long been recognised as a later addition, and 17 and 23 as priestly material. Genesis 15, under the impact of Lothar Peritt's study of covenant theology, is now regarded by many as stemming from dtn/dtr circles. Both Blum and Westermann point out that the motif of the guiding angel in 24:7, 40 finds its closest parallels in such dtn/dtr texts as Exod 23:20; 32:34; 33:2. Van Seters has provided good evidence that Genesis 20 (21:22-34 continues the story of Abraham and Abimelech) is a later composition based on 12:10-20. Blum has identified compositional and linguistic similarities between 22 and 21:8-21. Against Blum however the differences between 16 and 21:8-21 are sufficient in my judgement to rule out assigning them to the same stage of composition.

2aβ-3). The promise of blessing is rather complex and warrants closer examination so as to be sure of its meaning.

The structure of this promise is as follows: two statements about the divine initiative, namely v2aβ and 3a, are followed by two statements which describe the consequences of this initiative, namely v 2b and 3b.¹⁷ Although there are two parallel structural components they nevertheless combine to form a larger whole. The first component, the promise that "I will bless you"(v 2aβ), has an important function in relation to the subsequent verses. It establishes that all blessing associated with Abraham has its origin not in the patriarch himself, but in the Lord. The promise of a great name is initially somewhat puzzling in terms of its location. One would perhaps expect it to follow the promise of becoming a great nation in v 2aα. However its location does become clearer from a consideration of the consequences of the Lord's initiative in blessing Abraham and making his name great—he will be a blessing. A check on other occurrences of the term blessing in the OT reveals three texts where Israel is described as a blessing; Isa 19:24; Zech 8:13; Ezek 34:26. In these it is clear that Israel becomes a manifestation to others of divine blessing. This is particularly so in the text from Zechariah, but present in the others as well. Also when one reads the Zecharian text in conjunction with such passages as Jer 29:22 and Gen 48:20 the sense is that when a person or nation is described as a blessing or curse, this involves the invocation of the person or nation's name. We can now see the reason for the location of the promise of a great name. The consequences of the divine initiative in v 2aβ are not only that Abraham will become a manifestation of the Lord's blessing, but that because of this his name will be invoked for blessing.¹⁸

That this is the sense of Gen 12:2b is confirmed by an examination of the second structural component in v 3. Before commenting on this however I would draw attention to the relationship between land and nation, the blessing and the great name. Land and nation (descendants) make up the content of the blessing. Through these Abraham will become a manifestation of the Lord's blessing. Furthermore, the realisation of the promise of a great nation in the land which the Lord is to show Abraham will be what constitutes the greatness of his name. These links emerge from the overall unity of the text, the linguistic association

¹⁷Gesenius-Kautsch (*Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* [2d ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1910] 110i) comments that the imperative with the waw copular "frequently expresses also a consequence which is to be expected with certainty". Cf. also Westermann, *Genesis*, 144.

¹⁸H. Gunkel understood the phrase as referring back to the name (*Genesis* [8. Auflage; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969] 164).

between *great* nation and *great* name suggested by the root *gdl*, and my reading of the story of Abraham for which this text is the introduction.¹⁹

The second structural component in v 3 functions in concert with the first one to create a larger unified whole. The sequence of vv 2b-3a reveals that the manifestation of Abraham as blessed by the Lord will provoke responses from others. Some will acknowledge that Abraham is blessed while another will curse him instead.²⁰ Either reaction involves the pronouncement of the name of Abraham. The Lord's promise in v 3a is intended within this context as an assurance that the name of Abraham will be exclusively linked to blessing. The sign of this will be that those who bless Abraham will receive blessing, whereas the one who curses him will not (cf. the parallels in Gen 27:29 and Num 24:9). Gen 12:3b then describes the outcome of this divine promise—the triumph of the Lord's purpose with Abraham. Despite the conflict foreseen in v 3a, all the families of the earth will ultimately bless themselves by Abraham, that is, by invoking his name. This statement therefore parallels and completes the preceding one in v 2b. Abraham will become a blessing such that all the families of the earth will bless themselves by him. Although it is not made explicit, I would argue there is a clear implication in v 3 that the families of the earth will not only recognise Abraham as the paradigm of blessing, but will also recognise the Lord as the exclusive source of this blessing (cf. v 2aβ).

There has been considerable dispute over the meaning of the nifal form of the verb in Gen 12:3b, and its other occurrences in 18:18 and 28:14b. The Septuagint understood it in a passive sense, a reading which was followed by other versions and commentators. In conjunction with the phrase "by you" the verse meant that all the families of the earth would receive blessing via Abraham the mediator of blessing. The alternative proposal was to read both the nifal form and the hithpael form (in 22:18 and 26:4) as a reflexive. This is accepted by Westermann and the majority of more recent studies. However Westermann holds that "the reflexive translation is saying no less than the passive or receptive. When the 'families of the earth' bless themselves under the invocation of his name, then the obvious presupposition is that they receive the blessing."²¹

¹⁹ It is generally accepted that the promise of a great nation has a larger horizon than Abraham in mind. The point of contention in contemporary scholarship is whether this larger horizon is, in the classical view, a Yahwist source from the early monarchy or, in Blum's view, an exilic narrative that ends with Genesis 50.

²⁰The use of the plural in reference to blessing and the singular in reference to cursing is noteworthy. It suggests that the great majority will bless Abraham, providing thereby a link to the confident tone of v 3b.

²¹Westermann, *Genesis*, 152.

Blum accepts the reflexive meaning of the nifal form of the verb but disputes Westermann's understanding of the sense of the verse. According to Blum it does not portray Abraham as a mediator of blessing (Segensmittler), but as the exemplar or paradigm of divine blessing—the same sense as in Gen 48:20 and Ruth 4:11, and for the curse in Jer 29:22.²² Thus the families of the earth will desire to be blessed *as* Abraham is blessed. This interpretation is particularly relevant for Blum's case against the Yahwist. It enables him to argue that 12:1-3 is not meant to show that Abraham (and Israel) was to be a mediator of divine blessing to the troubled humanity described in Genesis 2-11. Blum also holds that the promise of blessing does not appear as a key theme in the subsequent narrative of his Vg2, nor is it linked to the promise of descendants in 13:14-17. It first appears in the Jacob History in 28:14b. For Blum the author of 12:1-3 was reworking an earlier stage of redaction (Vg1) to enable it to address a situation of threat—the exile—rather than constructing an extensive and carefully planned narrative, one which would show the unfolding of the promises to Abraham. The closest OT parallels he finds are such late texts as Isa 51:1-2; 61:9; Zech 8:13.

I would agree with Blum's understanding of Gen 12:3b. That is, ultimately all the families of the earth will desire to be blessed *like* Abraham, the paradigm of divine blessing. However I do not think he takes sufficient account of 12:3a, describing it essentially as a promise of divine protection. But this only takes account of the second part of v 3a. The first part clearly states that the Lord will bless those who bless Abraham. Putting v 3a and v 3b together then, one may say that the families of the earth who desire to be blessed like Abraham will receive their blessing. In this sense one can legitimately speak of Abraham as a mediator of divine blessing.

THE STORY OF ABRAHAM

Having outlined the sense of Gen 12:1-3 we can now turn to a consideration of the way the promises unfold in the subsequent story of Abraham. In disagreement with Blum, my thesis here is that there is an integral relationship between Gen 12:1-3 and the subsequent narrative. The author of this narrative organised the material in a way that would reveal how the promises of 12:1-3 were realised and what was their theological significance. The structural outline below shows that, in line with Gen 12:1-2a α , the narrative sequence focuses first on the land that the Lord will show Abraham, and then on the promise of descendants

²²Blum, *Die Komposition*, 351. Against Westermann Blum would not accept that Ps 72:17 portrays the king as a source of blessing (p. 352, n. 24).

(nation). But it does so in such a way that the promise of blessing permeates each area of focus. As well, where the narrative does focus on land or descendants it does not lose sight of the other theme. This is in keeping with the unified and interrelational nature of 12:1-3.

STRUCTURE OF THE STORY OF ABRAHAM (GENESIS 12-21*)

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|---|-------------------|
| I. The Lord's purpose for Abraham | 12:1-3 |
| A. Command to leave country, kin and father's house | 12:1a |
| B. Promises accompanying the command | 12:1b-3 |
| 1. Promise to show Abraham the land | 12:1b |
| 2. Promise of a great nation | 12:2aa |
| 3. Promise of blessing | 12:2aβ-3 |
| II. Story of the realisation of the Lord's purpose | 12:4-21:7* |
| A. Story of how the Lord showed Abraham the land and promised a son | 12:4-18:15* |
| 1. How the Lord showed Abraham the land | 12:4-13:18* |
| a. The land that Abraham saw | 12:4-13:12* |
| 1) First journey to the land | 12:4a, 6, 8-20 |
| a) A land where he calls on the Lord but with no reply | 12:4a, 6, 8-9 |
| b) A land struck by famine | 12:10-20 |
| (1) Famine and departure from the land | 12:10 |
| (2) Trouble in Egypt/rescue by the Lord | 12:11-19 |
| (3) Expulsion from Egypt | 12:20 |
| 2) Second journey to the land (return) | 13:1-12* |
| a) A land where he calls on the Lord but with no reply | 13:1-4 |
| b) A land which Lot did not choose | 13:5-12* |
| (1) Conflict in the land | 13:5-7 |
| (2) Abraham's plan to resolve conflict | 13:8-9 |
| (3) Lot's choice of the Jordan valley | 13:10-12* |
| b. The land the Lord showed to Abraham | 13:14-18 |
| 1) The Lord shows Abraham the land of his choice | 13:14 |
| 2) The Lord's choice as a land of blessing | 13:15-16 |
| 3) Abraham invited to traverse the Lord's land | 13:17 |
| c. Third journey: Abraham traverses the Lord's land to Hebron | 13:18 |
| 2. Story of how the Lord promised Abraham and Sarah a son | 16:1-18:15* |
| a. The child Sarah sought | 16:1-14* |
| 1) The barren Sarah's plan for a child | 16:1-2, 4a |
| 2) Plan goes astray: loss of child | 16:4b-6 |
| 3) Lord's plan for the child | 16:7-8,11-14 (15) |

b. The son the Lord promised Abraham & Sarah	18:1-15
1) Divine visitation	18:1-8
2) The promise of a son	18:9-15
a) The promise given	18:9-10
b) The hopeless situation of their age	18:11-12
c) The promise reaffirmed	18:13-15
B. The contrasting story of Lot	18:16-19:38*
1. Story of the destruction of the land Lot chose	18:16-19:28*
a. Land exposed as evil (cursed)	18:16, 20-22a, 33b; 19:1-11
1) Abraham told of divine visit to Sodom	18:16, 20-21
2) The evil of Sodom exposed	18:22a, 33b; 19:1-11
a) Divine visitation	18:22a, 33b; 19:1
b) Evil exposed	19:2-11
(1) Lot's hospitality	19:2-3
(2) Threat by <i>all</i> the inhabitants	19:4-9
(3) The rescue of Lot	19:10-11
b. Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah	19:12-28
1) Announcement of the destruction	19:12-13
2) Lot's reluctance to leave his chosen land	19:14-22
3) Execution of the destruction	19:23-26
a) Lot arrives safely at Zoar	19:23
b) Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah	19:24-26
(1) Destruction of cities and land	19:24-25
(2) Lot's wife sees and dies	19:26
c. Abraham sees the destruction	19:27-28
2. Story of how Lot came to have sons	19:30-38
a. The hopeless situation of Lot	19:30
b. The daughters' plan	19:31-32
c. Successful outcome of their plan/birth of sons	19:33-38
C. Sarah bears Abraham a son	21:1a, 2a, 7

The first major block of text after the promise runs from Gen 12:4 to 13:1 (II A 1). Its principal concern is the realisation of the promise about "the land that I will show you" within the context of Abraham's execution of God's command (12:1a). It consists of a frame constructed of Abraham's journeys, in which have been set the story of the ancestress in danger and the account of the separation of Lot from Abraham. These combine to form an impressive larger narrative with its dramatic climax in 13:14-18. This climax is the first point in the narrative after 12:1-3 where the Lord addresses Abraham. It also marks a change in perspective from the land that Abraham saw to the land that the Lord showed (revealed to) him. In a more subtle way this section also introduces a number of themes that will be taken up in the remainder of the story.

The reader is first of all invited to view the land from the perspective of Abraham, via a series of events on two journeys which he makes. These two journeys are meant to be read in the context of his execution of the divine command in Gen 12:1a. The first describes his journey to the land, his traversal of it and departure from it to Egypt because of famine; the second describes his return to the land after his expulsion from Egypt. A number of events accompanying these journeys deal with aspects of the land which combine to portray it—from the perspective of Abraham's experience—as a most unsuitable dwelling place. A fitting contrast is established for the dramatic disclosure in Gen 13:14-17. Thus the land is first of all encountered as a place occupied by Canaanites and Abraham is obliged to move from (their) town of Shechem to the remoteness of the mountain between Bethel and Ai (12:6, 8). There, in a somewhat ambiguous sequence, Abraham builds an altar and calls on the name of the Lord but then moves on (12:8-9). A reading of this sequence within the larger context suggests that Abraham moved on because the Lord did not respond to his call—from Abraham's "perspective" an indication that this was not the land promised to him.²³ Next the land is one afflicted by famine, so severe that Abraham is forced to leave it (v 10). But this famine ravaged land is also the one to which he is obliged to return against his will, when he runs foul of Pharaoh in Egypt (vv 18-20). In itself 12:10-20 gives no indication that Abraham intended to return to the land. In Genesis 13 the reader finds that the land causes a threatening conflict between the herdsmen of Abraham and Lot (13:5, 7).²⁴ And when Abraham offers Lot a choice of where to live he does not choose to live in

²³The phrase "called on the name of the Lord" occurs elsewhere in Genesis in 4:26; 13:4; 21:33 and 26:25. As noted by Westermann (*Genesis*, 156) and others it describes an act of worship. However this may not be precise enough for each occurrence, which needs to be judged in its context. In the conflict between the Lord and Baal on Mt. Carmel, in a setting which is clearly cultic, the same expression expects an answer from God (cf. 1 Kgs 18:24). This is also the case in Ps 99:6; 116:2-4 (cf. vv 13, 17). There are other similar expressions which do not use *šem* (name) in Ps 3:5; 22:3; 28:1; 86:5; 88:10; 118:5; 120:1; 138:3). Gen 4:26 could be taken to contain this meaning of the phrase as well as the more general notion of worship. Gen 21:33 and 26:25 accompany gestures acknowledging the divinity and so do not contain this meaning. In contrast to 12:8 however Isaac in 26:25 pitches his tent only after building an altar and calling on the name of the Lord—gestures which are a response to the theophany.

²⁴Westermann identifies a priestly narrative layer in Gen 13:6, 11b, 12a (*Genesis*, 172-73)

this land (13:8-11a). Instead he sees the lush Jordan valley, from a human perspective surely a land of blessing, and settles there.

It is only at this point that the Lord intervenes and shows Abraham that this is in fact the land he has chosen for him. Furthermore, and paradoxically in the context as I have outlined it, the Lord assures Abraham that this is a land that will support his numerous descendants “for ever” (13:15-16). If my reading of the basic sequence of this section is correct then we have here a powerful evocation of the theme of blessing. In terms of the promises of 13:14-17 and its relationship to the preceding narrative, the claim is made that the Lord alone has the power to make this land, occupied by Canaanites, ridden by famine, a land that leads to conflict between Abraham and Lot, a land a man would not choose, into a blessed place in which descendants “like the dust of the earth” can live.²⁵

I would suggest that the the Lord’s silence in Gen 12:8 and 13:4 has an important function within this context. The land is not one that Abraham can see and settle in at a time and a place that he chooses. It only becomes the land of promise, a land in which one can live a life of blessing, when the Lord pronounces it to be so. Without the power of the divine word the land can bring no blessing, as Abraham learns from bitter experience. It is surely significant therefore that after the Lord shows the land to Abraham and pronounces it to be the land of promise, he traverses it from Bethel/Ai to Hebron, and then journeys no more. He settles in Hebron and builds an altar to the Lord—but note, without this time calling on the name of the Lord (13:18).

The story of the ancestress in danger in Gen 12:10-20 has two important functions within the narrative. On the one hand it reveals a divine power that is clearly capable of achieving its purpose. The Lord is able to intervene in Pharaoh’s realm on behalf of Sarah (v 17) and to protect Abraham from the threat of death (cf. v 12). In concert with this the story shows that the divine purpose can be realised despite the initiatives of Abraham which go against that purpose. This element may be linked to the surrounding frame of Abraham’s journeys with their portrayal of the way he carried out the Lord’s command of 12:1. This element unfolds subtly within the course of the narrative and as such is quite different to the openly catechetical tone of Gen 18:17-19, 22b-33a.

On the other hand the rescue of Sarah prepares for subsequent developments in the second major block of text. The rescue shows that Sarah is an important focus of the Lord’s power and purpose. But for what? In itself the story of 12:10-20 does not directly relate the divine

²⁵That the Lord will definitely do this is captured by the use of the verb *šim* in Gen 13:16.

intervention on her behalf to the promise of descendants, a key concern of the second block of text. It is via the larger context, and especially Genesis 16 and 18 where Sarah becomes a prominent figure, that this emerges. Thus there is an integral relationship between the two major blocks of text, and as with the “revelation” of the land to Abraham, a gradual unfolding of the divine purpose. A similar comment may be made about Lot, the man who chose what, from a human point of view, looked to be a land of blessing. Genesis 13 establishes a contrast between Lot’s choice and the Lord’s choice for Abraham, a contrast that is subsequently developed in Genesis 19 which describes the traumatic consequences Lot’s choice had for himself and the future of his family.

Turning to Genesis 16 and 18:1-15 we find a sequence that unfolds in a way analogous to that of Genesis 12-13. As in 12:1-3 where the promise of the land is followed by the promise of a great nation, so the initial focus on land in 12:4-13:18 shifts to a focus on descendants. The shift is made rather bluntly in 16:1 with the statement “now Sarai, Abram’s wife, bore him no children”. As in the case of Abraham faced with the barren land, so Sarah, confronted by her own barrenness, takes matters into her own hands. And as with Abraham in 12:10-20 events result in the undoing of the very plan she initiated to obtain children for herself. Hagar’s disdain leads Sarah to treat her so harshly she flees, and in so doing seems to end all hopes for a child. In 12:10-20 we read of Sarah’s status as wife and—from the larger context—future mother of the nation being threatened, and the Lord’s rescue of her via a dramatic intervention. In Genesis 16 there is also threat and rescue, but of a woman who is already pregnant. Hence the focus of the narrative shifts to the identity of Hagar’s child and its future relationship to Abraham and his land (cf. 13:14-17). The angel intervenes to inform Hagar that she will bear a son, and what his relationship with the family of Abraham will be.²⁶ Hence the maid who looked to have no dwelling place with Abraham, has her son and his dwelling place described in relation to Abraham’s descendants. One can see then that the chapter provides another example of divine blessing giving life and power to what, from a human point of view, looked to be hopeless. Also in relation to the first block of text Genesis 16 confirms the divine commitment to establishing blessing via an all too inadequate patriarch. Despite Abraham’s neglect of

²⁶This is expressed in the phrase “he will dwell over against his brothers”. I would suggest that the function of the etiology of v 14 is to identify this dwelling place.

Hagar (v 7, cf. 12:14-16) and the threat to her which results from this, her life is preserved and she bears his child.²⁷

If the divine purpose is to bestow blessing through Abraham, it is equally so through Sarah. This was intimated in 12:10-20. In Gen 18:1-15 it becomes explicit. Yet just as Abraham had to wait upon the Lord to show him the land, so Sarah had to wait upon the Lord for her child. And just as the Lord revealed the land to Abraham only after a series of unsuccessful initiatives on his part and after Lot's rejection of it because it did not appear fertile, so the Lord gives Sarah her son only after the unfortunate episode with Hagar, and in her old age when she believed she was no longer fertile (18:11-12). As the barren land can only become fruitful via the Lord's blessing, so Sarah's old and barren womb can only become fruitful via the Lord's blessing. From these comments one can see how the narrative sequence reveals the working out of 12:1-3 (albeit incompletely), and how the promise of land and son are integrally related to, and manifest, the promise of blessing. The theme of land is not drawn out explicitly in 18:1-15 because Abraham and Sarah are already living in it (cf. 13:18; 18:1).

The story of Lot provides a telling contrast to the story of Abraham, and by way of this contrast points to Abraham as the one on whom blessing is bestowed. To return for a moment to Genesis 13, one recalls that Lot chose what looked to be a blessed land, "like the garden of the Lord" (13:10). In fact however it is a land that cannot bring blessing, for it is an evil land. The nature and extent of this evil is exposed by the heavenly visitors in 19:1-11 and the dramatic events which ensue. I would suggest that the hostility of the inhabitants is what prompts the divine decision to destroy Sodom (and Gomorrah).²⁸ In the text under discussion, the first announcement of destruction comes in 19:13, immediately after the drama culminating in the threat to Lot himself. Within the larger context one may reasonably suggest that the inhabitants of Sodom come under the curse because in threatening Lot, they have disdained Abraham (cf. 12:3a).

Nowhere in this story is the contrast between curse and blessing more clearly drawn than in 19:24-28. Here we find all the land of the valley destroyed, and Abraham standing in the land of blessing, looking down

²⁷It is reasonable to propose there was an old ending to the story of Hagar in which she named the child, as instructed by the angel. This was later replaced by v 15 which has Abraham naming him. Verses 15-16 are generally regarded as priestly.

²⁸It is an evil in which *all* the inhabitants are involved, and their hostility to the Lord is indicated in the way they threaten the life of the visitors, of Lot's daughters—through his attempt to pacify the inhabitants—and Lot himself.

upon the destruction. This scene not only recalls 18:16, 20-22a, 33b and marks the completion of the divine visitation, but within the larger context it recalls Genesis 13, where Abraham and Lot surveyed the land and Lot made his choice. Two points can be drawn from this association. First, it affirms that only the Lord can bring true blessing. That which from a human perspective looks blessed may not be so, as the divine visitation of Sodom showed. And that which from a human perspective looks to be a barren land can, through the Lord's power, become a land of blessing.²⁹ Second, the scene in 19:27-28 functions as an assurance that the promise of blessing will be realised. The God who has the power to destroy such evil certainly has the power to bring blessing to Abraham and his descendants in the land.

If the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah creates a contrast with the land promised to Abraham, it also creates a contrast with the promise of descendants to Abraham. I would note however that, as with the story of Abraham, the themes of land and descendants are closely related. There are shifts of emphasis throughout, but they nevertheless function in relationship to one another. Thus an important function of the theme of land in Genesis 19 is to show how Lot's attachment to the land of his choice has serious consequences for the future of his family. This is indicated initially by the way Lot puts his daughters at risk in the hope of maintaining a peaceful relationship with the inhabitants of Sodom (19:8). It appears next in his failure to convince his sons-in-law of the impending destruction. Verse 14 states "he seemed to his sons-in-law to be jesting". The implication is that Lot was not convinced that the place he had made his home was under the curse. There is subsequently his reluctance to leave the city (v 16) and his plea to be allowed to stop at Zoar, rather than flee directly to the hills as instructed. The run of the story even suggests that his tarrying and insistence on going to Zoar were contributing factors to his wife's death.³⁰

In Gen 19:30 Lot is afraid to stay where the men had assured him of safety—Zoar—and he moves to a cave in the hills. This leads to the climax in the development of the theme of descendants. Without a wife and hence no chance of a son, without husbands for his daughters and dwelling in a remote place, Lot would seem to be in a hopeless situation

²⁹These remarks suggest that Gen 13:10aβba and 13 may be later additions, designed to anticipate the subsequent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

³⁰Gen 19:23 states that the sun had risen when Lot came to Zoar. Had he left immediately and gone to the hills he would have been out of the valley before sunrise. Lot's wife looked back while still in the valley, because the sun enabled her to see. The very next verse has Abraham looking upon the destruction at sunrise, without danger.

in terms of the future of his family. Yet via his daughters' incestuous ingenuity the family continues. Nothing is stated explicitly by the narrator about the relationship of this to the divine purpose; one may presume the incestuous nature of the union made it inappropriate. But, given that this section of the story forms an integral part of the overall theme of the rescue of Lot, can one suggest that it is meant to be seen from the perspective of 12:1-3? Furthermore, after all his blundering and dithering Lot is for once, shall we say, quite passive and unable to initiate anything; rather like Abraham after Lot's departure and Sarah in her old age. The narrative also points out that the sons born to Lot become the ancestors of nations.³¹

It is reasonable to expect that this story concluded with an account of the birth of Isaac in 21:1-7*. Not only does it demonstrate the fulfillment of the promise of 18:1-15, and 13:14-17, but it also provides a suitable parallel to the account of the birth of Moab and Ben-ammi in 19:30-38.

What can one conclude from this analysis of the text in relation to the debate about the Yahwist? Certainly I would not claim that it demonstrates the existence of a Yahwist document. The textual basis is too small. My purpose has been a more modest one. It has sought to test the arguments arranged against the Yahwist by Blum, a test which has led me in turn to formulate a proposal about the composition of the story of Abraham. I would claim my analysis has shown that Blum's understanding of the composition of the story of Abraham is incorrect in relation to the stage introduced by Gen 12:1-3, which raises doubts about whether he has definitively demolished the source hypothesis as it is applied to the book of Genesis. Furthermore I believe my analysis has shown that the story of Abraham introduced by Gen 12:1-3 is indeed a carefully planned narrative, and one which bears an integral relationship to its introduction.³² Given that 12:1-3 has a larger horizon than the story of Abraham in mind, one may reasonably expect that the same sort of careful organisation would be evident in the subsequent story of Israel. Whether this is so and just how far it extends can only be established by a thoroughgoing investigation of the whole of the Pentateuch.

³¹In relation to this it is worth noting the way Genesis 38 tells how the sons of Judah were born of his union with Tamar, his daughter-in-law.

³²It is beyond the scope of the paper to discuss the date of this story of Abraham. However, in relation to Blum's chronology of the stages of composition (cf. n. 2), the text I have identified would be of pre-exilic and pre-dtr provenance.