

A Lesson in Hebrew Storytelling

Have you ever felt that you were entering a strange world when reading the Bible? Not only is the culture different – with animal sacrifices and practices we might consider strange and even immoral (such as having slaves and offering a servant to one's husband as a second wife) but even the method of telling the accounts seems odd. There seems to be needless repetition and random details are included, while details we are interested in are left out. And of course there are all those genealogies!

But there are reasons why accounts are written as they are. Most importantly, accounts were meant to be told, not read. The written word was not nearly as prominent as today, and was very expensive to produce and transmit. This was true up until the invention of the printing press in 1440. Accounts were told in ways that would be easy to remember and pass down, and were designed to draw attention to the main point or purpose of the story.

The account of Abraham's life is a good example. On the other side of this insert is an outline that shows how this account is constructed, why there is so much repetition of stories, and what the author (Moses in this case, though ultimately God himself) intended the main point of the story to be. By understanding the author's purpose, we often see meanings in the story we otherwise would miss, and we protect ourselves from making false assumptions or 'learning' lessons that the text itself does not teach. This keeps us from "adding to or taking away from" the Word God has passed down to us (Revelation 22:18-19), assuring us that we are "rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15)

The account of Abraham, (Genesis 12:1-21:7) is in a form called a 'chiasm', after the Greek letter chi, or 'X', where the story builds up to a center point, then repeats key themes in reverse order. This form is very common in ancient oral traditions, because it is easy to remember all the main parts of the story and it naturally builds to a climax – the main or most pivotal part of the story:

a - Introduction - journey to Canaan and promise of descendants (12:1-9)

b – Abram lies about Sarah – God protects them (12:10-20)

c – Lot settles in Sodom (13:1-18)

d – Abram intercedes to save Lot - militarily (14:1-24)

e – Promise of a son from Abram himself (15:1-21)

f – Ishmael's birth and God's promise to him (16:1-16)

g – Promise of a son restated – new names – sign of circumcision (17:1-21)

f' – Ishmael circumcised, promise to Ishmael restated (17:18-27)

e' – Promise of a son from Abraham and Sarah themselves (18:1-15)

d' – Abraham intercedes to save Lot – through prayer (18:16-33)

c' – Lot flees Sodom and settles in Moab (19:1-38)

b' – Abraham lies about Sarah, God protects them (20:1-18)

a' – Conclusion – promise fulfilled as Isaac is born (21:1-7)

(notice how story of Hagar and Ishmael overlap this account (16:1-16 and 21:8-21) to tie chapters 12-19 with what follows. Some accounts are like an oral tapestry with several "stories within the story")

Outline courtesy of "The Literary Structure of the Old Testament" by David A. Dorsey