

Lecture 8: The Patriarchs: Isaac, Jacob (and Esau), and Joseph.

Reading: Genesis 25-33; 37, 39-50; Kugel 133-162, 176-197. [Note that the Joseph story has a literary unity and polish that the earlier patriarchal stories do not have.]

Topics:

- the twelve sons of Israel;
- the tribes of Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Ephraim -- a study in contrasts;
- Genesis 49:10 - one of the most cryptic verses in the Torah;
- Joseph --the first assimilated Israelite.

General pattern in the narratives of Genesis:

- Anonymous; the Torah does not claim to be the work of Moses;
 - ♦ All narratives in the Bible are anonymous;
- Omniscient narrator; knows what God said; knows private conversations of characters, etc.

A series of discrete episodes strung along a narrative frame; not a story so much as a series of stories.

- The order can be changed without consequence;
- Few references from one story to the other;
- Two good examples of self-contained stories: Gen 34 and 38 (both of which we are skipping).

Big exception to this is the Joseph story, which runs from chapter 37-50 (with some inserted material like Gen 38; 46:8-27; 49) which is a single sustained story.

Themes and Patterns

Barren matriarchs: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, [Hannah mother of Samuel in 1 Samuel 1] [evoked by prophets like Isaiah 54:1] – message seems to be mercy/power of God.

Younger son ousts/takes precedence over the elder:

- Isaac replaces Ishmael (25:5):
 - ♦ Different mothers: Sarah vs Hagar;
 - ♦ (remarkable how little is told about Isaac);
- Jacob replaces Esau:
 - ♦ Twins! Same mother!
 - ♦ Storyteller seems defensive about Jacob acquiring Esau's birthright; does so three times (oracle delivered to Rebecca Gen 25:19-26; lentils 25:29-34; Jacob steals the blessing (26);
 - ♦ Perhaps reinforces the covenant idea that the link between Israel and God is not natural but constructed;
 - ♦ Jacob is trickster hero; narrator has some sympathy for Esau;

- ♦ Ishmael and Esau are not part of Israelite sacred history; they are the ancestors of neighboring peoples; but all twelve of Jacob's sons, even the sons of the maidservants, are (see Kugel)– why the shift?
- Joseph lords over his brothers;
- Ephraim gains over Menasseh (48);
- [Moses is the leader, not the older brother Aaron];
- [David is the leader, not his older brothers].

Power of blessing [and curse]:

- Noah's curse of Ham and Canaan (9);
- Isaac's blessing of Jacob [Esau]: Isaac blesses the "wrong" son (27);
- Jacob's blessing of Ephraim and Menasseh: Jacob blesses the "wrong" son (48);
- Jacob's blessing of the 12 sons (49).

Sometimes the sons are individuals, sometimes they are the eponymous ancestors of tribes or peoples (see Kugel):

- Offspring of Ishmael are [Arab] tribes (25:16);
- Rebecca's oracle re her two sons (25);
- "Children of Israel" = people of Israel (32:33; cf. 34:7);
- Esau is Edom (25:30; 36:1);
- Blessing of Jacob: Ephraim and Menasseh (48);
- Jacob's blessing of twelve sons = tribes (49):
 - ♦ Reuben loses primogeniture; tribe of Reuben is a weak tribe (49:4 referring to 35:22);
 - ♦ Simeon and Levi are punished (49:5-7 referring to c. 34); both are weak tribes except that Levi, through a process unknown to us, becomes the priestly tribe (a development as yet unknown to Gen 49);
 - ♦ Judah is the "royal" tribe;
 - ♦ Joseph is the prosperous tribe.

Joseph narrative or novella:

Explains how the Israelites came to Egypt.

Beautifully told story; everyone's favorite scene: Joseph coming out to his brothers (Gen 45:1-4):

- There are occasional bumps in the story: who sold Joseph into slavery: the Midianites (37:36)? The Ishmaelites (37:25-28; 39:1)? The brothers (45:4-5)? Who pleaded with the brothers not to kill Joseph: Reuben (37:22) or Judah (37:26)?

Prominence of dreams and dream-interpretation; these are the skills of a sage.

Joseph as cultural hero: responsible for the land-tax system of Egypt (47:13-26).

Divine control of history (esp. Gen 45:7-8, 50:12) – this is stated by Joseph the character, not by the narrator.

A courtier story, from slave to prisoner to viceroy of Egypt; model for Esther and Daniel – is this the actual date of origin of the tale?

An assimilated Israelite: gets an Egyptian name and an Egyptian wife, the names of his children show he is prospering in Egypt, hides his identity ...