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GENESIS 12-50

A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition

Alex Varughese
Christina Bohn



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INTRODUCTION

A. The Relation of Genesis 1—11 to Genesis 12—50

Chapter 12 opens a major literary division in the book of Genesis. Chapters 12—50 focus on the family stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the ancestors of Israel (the patriarchal history), whereas chs 1—11 deal with the beginnings of the universe and humankind (the primeval history). The narrator, however, presents Genesis as a unified narrative that transitions from creation and humankind in general (1:1—6:5) to the family of Noah (6:6—11:9), to Shem (11:10-25), one of the three sons of Noah, and to the family of Terah (11:26-32), a descendant of Shem, and the father of Abraham.

Chapter 12 continues the story of Abraham and his family; the stories of chs 12—25 focus on Abraham and his encounters with God and his life in the land of Canaan. The stories of chs 26—50, for the most part, are about Jacob; his father, Isaac, is the central character in ch 26, and his son Joseph plays a key role in chs 37—50. Though chs 12—50 narrate the family stories of Israel's ancestors, God's relationship with the world established through his life-giving activities (chs 1—2) continues to be a major emphasis in this section. God encounters Abraham and promises to make

him into a great nation, bless him, and to extend his blessing to “all peoples on earth” through him (12:1-3; see also 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). This promise of blessing is an extension of the creational blessing in 1:28 (see also 9:1). Moreover, the covenant God establishes with Abraham and his descendants and the promises that accompany it (17:1-27) have their antecedent in God’s covenant with Noah, his descendants, and all living creatures (see 9:1-17); in both cases, the benefits of the covenant extend to the whole world.

The narrative’s focus on God’s relationship to the world through Abraham and his family is evident in the episodes of the interactions between the ancestors of Israel and other people groups such as the Canaanites (12:6; chs 18—19), the Egyptians (12:10-20; chs 39—50), the Philistines (20:1-18; 21:22-34; ch 26), the Arameans (chs 29—31), and the Mesopotamians (ch 14). The genealogical lists include Ishmael (25:1-18) and Esau (36:1-43), the nonchosen members of Abraham’s family. These episodes and genealogies link Abraham and his family with the rest of the world. Also, as 12:3 indicates, God has chosen Abraham and his family to mediate God’s blessing to the world, and thus to draw the world to a faithful relationship with God the Creator.

Genesis 12—50 also maintains a clear theological continuity with the preceding stories in chs 1—11. The Creator establishes relationship with his creation through the modes of speech and actions, which includes the pronouncement of blessing in chs 1—2. These chapters clearly imply listening/obedience as the proper way for the creation to maintain faithful relationship with the Creator. In ch 3, humans distrust God’s voice and listen to a creature, which brings God’s judgment and expulsion from the garden. However, God continues to interact with humans and invites them to listen to his voice (see God’s speech to Cain in 4:7). God not only warns Cain about the power of sin but also urges him to “rule over it” by listening to God’s voice. Cain follows the path of Adam and disregards God’s speech and permits sin to rule over him; as a result, violence becomes a way of life for humans (4:8, 23-24). The world becomes increasingly wicked and violent, which compels God to destroy his creation through a catastrophic flood (5:1—7:24).

However, the narrative also portrays Enoch (5:24) and Noah (6:9) as examples of those who have faithfully walked with God in the midst of wickedness in the world. Noah, a “righteous” and “blameless” person, listens to God’s speech and becomes the head of a new humanity, a new creation after the flood, which receives God’s blessings as well as the mandate, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth” (9:1; see 1:28). God also establishes a dependable and orderly world for Noah and his descendants (9:1-17). Noah

thus stands at the head of the new creation, the postflood humanity, as the alternative to the disobedient Adam.

The situation of humans, however, does not get better; the descendants of Noah follow the path of Adam and become proud and arrogant; they attempt to create unity by building a city and making a name for themselves, in defiance of God's purpose for them to "multiply on the earth" (9:7), and in fear of being "scattered over the face of the whole earth" (11:4). Humans come under God's judgment again, this time in the form of a worldwide scattering and confusion of language (11:1-9). What humans have resisted becomes a reality.

At the end of ch 11, the narrative presents Terah, Abraham's father, and Abraham and his wife, a part of the scattered humanity, on a migratory journey from their home in Ur in southern Mesopotamia to Canaan. The narrator's report of Terah's death (11:32) places Abraham in direct contact with his ancestors, with those who have listened, and those who have refused to listen to God.

As the narrative moves from the worldwide scene to this particular individual Abraham, it seems to raise the following questions: "Will God speak to Abraham?" "Will Abraham listen?" Yahweh's speaking to Abraham in 12:1-3 and Abraham's obedient response (12:4) admit him into the company of Enoch and Noah and set him up as a model of faithful hearing and faithful obedience for generations to come. Moreover, since the sinfulness of humans in general, and God's judgment of the scattering of humans in particular (chs 3—11; 11:1-9) serve as the universal setting of 12:1-3, God's call of Abraham is commonly understood to have a salvific purpose; that is, to extend his salvation to the entire world through Abraham and his family. The rest of the narrative of Scripture unfolds God's redemptive activities on behalf of the world through Israel, which culminates in the coming of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, and a true descendant of Abraham, to redeem the world (Matt 1:1; Luke 3:23-38).

B. Historical Setting of Genesis 12—50

Generally speaking, scholars belong to three camps on the matter of Israel's patriarchs and history. One group, following Wellhausen, claims that the Genesis records do not provide any actual historical data about the patriarchs or the particular period of their activities. They view the patriarchs as eponymous ancestors of the Israelite tribes, who may or may not have been real historical individuals. They do not think that the patriarchal traditions can be associated with any known event in the history of the ancient Near East. They also claim that history in the patriarchal stories is actually a reflec-

tion of the period in which these stories were composed by later Israelites, which is projected back into the ancient past (Wellhausen 1885, 318).

The second group clearly rejects the historicity of the patriarchal traditions by claiming that Israel's patriarchs never existed and that these traditions are imaginative literary creations by later Israelite communities. These traditions have no historical value; they are faith traditions created to inspire and promote faith in the present and future generations (see Thompson 1974; Van Seters 1975).

The third group finds history in the patriarchal traditions and relates this history to the history of the ancient Near East, known to us through archaeological discoveries. Scholars who belong to this group place the patriarchs in the early part of the second millennium (2000-1700 BC). This group values archaeological discoveries in Mesopotamia, Syria, and Palestine as important sources for our understanding of the patriarchs. Most of the evidence they cite deals with parallel names and cultural practices found in Mari and Nuzi discoveries and evidences of the migration of seminomadic groups from Mesopotamia into Syria-Palestine area in the early part of the second millennium.

Though the patriarchs themselves are not mentioned in the texts discovered from the ancient world, names like Nahor, Harran, Ishmael, and Benjamin have been found in the Mari texts. The name Jacob is found in an eighteenth-century BC text from upper Mesopotamia. The Ebla text, coming from around 2300 to 2000 BC, also contains names such as Abram and Ishmael (see Bright 2000, 77-78; Hamilton 1990, 61-62). These discoveries also reveal customs such as a childless couple adopting a servant who would become their heir (Gen 15:2-3), a barren wife giving her husband her maid-servant to have offspring (16:1-2; 30:1-13), and the selling of one's birthright (25:29-34; see other parallels in Bright 2000, 78-79; Hamilton 1990, 62). These parallels and the patriarchal mode of life as seminomads in Palestine are among the many reasons for Bright's conclusion that the patriarchs were part of the Amorite immigrant population that arrived in Palestine from the Mesopotamian region in the early part of the second millennium (2000, 47, 55, 77). We concur with the conclusions of scholars who draw support from archaeology and place the patriarchal stories between 2000 and 1700 BC.

C. Literary Forms of Genesis 12—50

Narratives and genealogies make up the two main literary forms in Gen 12—50. Here and there we find a few poetic pieces as well (see 16:11-12; 25:23; 27:27-29, 39-40; 49:1-27). Narratives are for the most part family stories, with attention given to the main characters. The narrator does not present the main characters as flawless individuals; the function of each narrative

is to show God's involvement in the life of less than perfect human beings to bring about his plans and purposes in the world.

God's call of Abraham and his obedient response (12:1-4) serve as the theological claim behind each narrative; this also provides the listening community with the standard for evaluating the actions of the members of Abraham's family. Moreover, each story is composed in such a way as to draw its readers into the story and to elicit a response from them, a way of life through which they may participate in the story and mission of God, or a way of life that stands opposed to God's plans and purposes in the world.

The genealogies in chs 12–50 link this section with chs 1–11, which contains six genealogies (see 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27). Genealogies in chs 12–50 include Ishmael (25:12), Isaac (25:19), Esau (36:1, 9), and Jacob (37:2). Whereas the genealogies in chs 1–11 demonstrate the kinship of Israel to surrounding peoples, the genealogies in chs 12–50 show the relationship between the chosen and the nonchosen families of Abraham. These genealogies show that though God has a special relationship with the chosen family of Abraham through his covenant with them, it is by no means an exclusive relationship. Moreover, these genealogies highlight the brother-brother relationship, and the possibility of living in peace with one another, one of the key issues in the Genesis stories.

D. Literary Structure of Genesis 12–50

Scholars are in general agreement that ch 12 introduces a new literary and theological tradition in Genesis, which traces the origin of the people of Israel to Abraham's obedient response to God's command and trust in God's promises. Scholars also recognize 11:27-32 as the bridge between the patriarchal traditions (chs 12–50) and the primeval traditions in Genesis (1:1–11:26).

The patriarchal traditions focus on the life of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the three great ancestors of Israel. For the purpose of this commentary, we divide these chapters into three major sections: Abraham stories (12:1–25:18), Jacob stories (25:19–36:43), and Joseph stories (37:1–50:26). The stories of Isaac, the essential link between Abraham and Jacob, are embedded in the stories of Abraham and Jacob. Chapter 26 is the only chapter that is devoted exclusively to Isaac. Chapter 36, the genealogy of Esau, interrupts the story of Jacob. The final segment of Jacob stories is embedded in the stories of Joseph, who emerges as the key character in chs 37–50. Jacob remains in the background; these chapters report the stories of the sons of Jacob, more importantly Joseph, and the circumstances that have led the family of Jacob to move from Canaan to Egypt. Jacob's final blessings and his death and burial bring

a closure to the Jacob stories (ch 49). The narrative concludes with Joseph's speech to his brothers and the report of his death (50:15-26).

E. Major Theological Themes of Genesis 12—50

The following is a summary of key theological themes that unify the major literary units in the patriarchal traditions. These key themes are an integral part of *God's promises to the patriarchs*, the central theme of the patriarchal traditions. Consult the From the Text sections in the commentary for secondary theological issues found in the various individual units in chs 12—50.

God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob connect the various stories in Gen 12—50 together and they serve as the theological setting in which Israel came into existence as a nation (see Exodus). The ancestral stories begin with God's promises to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3). God's promises appear again in the Abraham stories in 12:7; 13:14-17; 15:5; 15:18-20; 17:6-8; 18:17-18; 22:17-18; 24:7.

Isaac (26:3-4, 24) and Jacob (28:13-14; 35:11-12; 46:3-4) later become heirs to the promises; God's promises thus create a chosen family line within the various families that originate from Abraham in chs 12—50. Jacob's sons do not receive the promises directly from God, but Jacob transmits the promises to Joseph (48:3-4), which he then passes on to his brothers (50:24). It is important to note that Ishmael, the nonchosen son of Abraham, also receives God's promises, though the narrative makes clear that God's covenant is with Isaac, the son of God's promise (16:10-12; 17:20-21; 21:13, 18).

God's promises motivate Abraham to enter into a relationship of trust in God and obedience to his command (12:1-4). The promises given to Abraham at various occasions include a son, land, descendants including nations and kings, covenant, blessing, and God's presence (see the texts above). The promise of a son guarantees a future for the childless Abraham and Sarah. Initially, the promise does not identify Sarah as the mother. Abraham receives the promise of a son through Sarah (17:16-20), after the birth of Ishmael, a son through Hagar, Sarah's maidservant (16:15-16). Both Abraham and Sarah receive the promise of nations and kings (17:6, 16). The promise of descendants finds its fulfillment not only through the line of Isaac but also through the line of Ishmael (25:12-18) and the children of Keturah (25:1-5). Both Isaac (26:4) and Jacob (28:14; 35:11) also receive the promise of numerous descendants.

The promise of land begins with God's command to Abraham to "go . . . to the land I will show you" (12:1). God promises Abraham that he will give Canaan, the land of his sojourning, to his descendants (12:7). Later, God reveals the boundary of the land of promise, "from the Wadi of Egypt to the

great river, the Euphrates” (15:18-21). The promise of the land is reiterated in 17:8; 22:17; 24:7. The land is also an integral part of God’s promises to Isaac (26:3) and Jacob (28:13; 35:12).

As the writer of Hebrews states, the patriarchs lived their lives “by faith” as “foreigners and strangers on earth” (11:13-16). They owned in their own lifetime only small parcels of land they purchased; Abraham purchased a “field in Machpelah” to bury his wife Sarah, which later became the family burial plot (Gen 23:1-20); later, Jacob bought a “plot of ground” in Shechem to pitch his tent (33:18-20). The promise of the land finds the beginning of its fulfillment in the stories narrated in Joshua.

The promise of blessing in the patriarchal tradition is best understood as an extension of God’s creational blessing (Gen 1:22, 28). God’s blessing shapes the life of Abraham (12:2; 22:17), Isaac (26:3, 24), and Jacob (28:4; 32:29 [30 HB]); it is at work in the birth of children (16:15-16; 21:1-5; 25:1-4, 21; 29:31—30:24), increase in their herds and flock, and all other areas of life, even in the midst of adversities of life (see 12:10-20; 26:12-14, 32; 30:25-43; 39:2-4; 41:51-52).

The promise of blessing to the patriarchs also comes with the call to be a blessing to “all peoples on earth” (12:3). The mission of the chosen family is to be a source of blessing to others. Abraham and his family fulfill this mission in their interactions with members of their family and others at various times (see 13:1—14:16; 20:17-18; 26:26-31; 30:27; 39:4-5; 41:56-57). The promise of blessing through Abraham and his family to all peoples moves from general well-being to the good news of salvation in the NT. The Apostle Paul finds in Gen 12:3 the gospel announced “in advance to Abraham” concerning God’s plan to “justify the Gentiles by faith” (Gal 3:8).

The promise of a covenant marks the distinctiveness of the chosen family line in the patriarchal stories. God initiates this covenant with Abraham in Gen 15:7-21 and it is reiterated in 17:1-27. Through this covenant God enters into an irrevocable relationship with Abraham. God’s promises to Abraham become binding and eternal through the covenant. On his part, Abraham keeps the covenant by circumcising himself and all male members of his family. God’s promises to Isaac (26:3-6, 24) and Jacob (28:3-4, 13-15; 35:11-13) indicate their place in Abraham’s family as heirs to God’s covenant with Abraham. Later in Exodus, God establishes his covenant with the descendants of Jacob/Israel at Sinai, after their deliverance from their bondage in Egypt (Exod 19—24; see 19:3-6).

The promise of God’s presence with the patriarchs during their journeys, whether as sojourners in Canaan or outside of Canaan, reflects his commitment to remain faithful to the relationship he has established with them

(see Gen 17:7-8; 26:3, 24; 28:15; 46:4). At critical junctures in their life they experience God's presence. He appears to them and speaks to them, giving them guidance and reiterating his promises. Except for God's appearance to Jacob in a vision and the promise of his presence with him in Egypt (46:2-4), chs 37—50 lack theophany reports. However, the narrator repeatedly states that "the LORD was with him [Joseph]" in the trouble-filled times of his life in Egypt (39:2, 3, 21). It is important to note that in the patriarchal stories God's presence is not confined to the chosen family members; the narrator reports that "God was with the boy [Ishmael] as he grew up" (21:20).

The patriarchal traditions also focus on the patriarchs' response to God's promises. The patriarchs' future is shaped not only by the promises of God but also by their obedience to the one who makes promises to them. The patriarchal narrative begins with the report of Abraham's obedience to God's command, which leads him to the land of Canaan (12:4-5). Abraham participates in the covenant-making ritual in 15:7-21 by bringing all the animals God commanded him to bring and preparing them for the ritual. Abraham keeps the covenant by obeying the circumcision command (17:1-27). He listens to God's counsel about Ishmael's future (21:11-14). He obeys God's command and takes Isaac to offer him as a sacrifice (22:1-19).

Abraham stories also show that Abraham's obedience to God is rooted in his trust in God's promises; he believed that the promise maker is the promise keeper (15:6; 22:8, 14). God counts Abraham's trust in God's promises as "righteousness" (15:1-6). The theme of the patriarchs' obedience to God continues in the Isaac-Jacob traditions. Isaac obeys God's command and stays in Gerar (26:2-3). Jacob responds to God's command to go back to his homeland and departs Harran with his family (31:3, 17-18). He again obeys God's command and makes the pilgrimage to Bethel and builds an altar there (35:1-7). Jacob listens to God's instruction and promises and makes his journey to Egypt (46:2-7). The patriarchs thus clearly set an example for the covenant family on the appropriate way to respond to God's promises and his involvement in their lives.

COMMENTARY

I. ABRAHAM STORIES: GENESIS 12:1—25:18

12:1—
25:18

Overview

The stories of Abraham (12:1—25:18) do not follow any logical order. The narrative begins with God's speech to Abraham (12:1-3). God-Abraham encounters continue in 13:14-18; 15:1-21; 17:1-27; 18:1-15, 16-33; 22:1-19. These narratives, except 18:16-33, revolve around the theme of promise—the promise of descendants, land, and blessing. The interaction between God and Abraham in 18:16-33 shows Abraham engaging in the task of mediation, appealing to God's justice as God deliberates on the destruction of the wicked city of Sodom. Scattered here and there are personal and family stories of Abraham, his wife Sarah, their son Isaac (12:4—13:1; 21:1-7; 23:1-2, 17-20; 24:1-67; 25:7-11), and other members of his household such as Lot (13:2-13; 19:1-38), Sarah's maidservant Hagar whom Abraham took as a wife, and their son Ishmael (16:1-6, 15-16; 21:8-14; 25:12-18), and his wife Keturah and her children (25:1-6). Abraham's interactions with others in the world are narrated in 14:1-24; 20:1-18; 21:22-34; 23:3-16.

Though there is no discernible logical ordering, scholars have noted within 11:10—25:18 a somewhat chiasmic structure by including the ancestry of Abraham (11:10-32) in the patriarchal traditions. Thus ancestors of Abraham (11:10-32) and descendants of Abraham (25:1-18) envelop the Abraham traditions. Within this genealogical opening and ending, the narrator includes Sarah narratives in chs 12 and 23, Lot narratives in chs 13 and 18—19, Hagar stories in chs 16 and 21, Isaac’s birth stories in chs 18 and 21, Abimelek stories in chs 20 and 21, Abraham’s journey in 11:27—12:9 and 22:1-19, and narratives that deal with the land issue in chs 13 and 23. The marriage of Isaac and Rebekah (ch 24), which opens the possibility of future generations, anticipates the fulfillment of the promise of descendants in chs 12, 15, and 17. The theme of covenant in chs 15 and 17 serves as the center of this chiasmic organization. The narrative thus seeks to show that the entire life of Abraham was shaped by God’s covenant with him and the promises that accompany it; this is the foundation of Israel’s history and faith we find in the OT Scriptures.

A. Abram’s Journey from Harran to Canaan (12:1-20)

I. God’s Command, Promises, and Abram’s Obedience (12:1-9)

BEHIND THE TEXT

Genesis 11:27-32 gives the reader a glimpse of the world that is immediately behind the narrative of 12:1-9. The story of Abram belongs to the early part of the second millennium, a time when the Amorites controlled most of Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine (2000-1700 BC). Genesis 11:27 identifies him as one of the three sons of Terah, a descendant of Shem, one of the three sons of Noah. Genesis 11:31 identifies Abram as a native of Ur, an urban center in the southern part of Mesopotamia. He belonged to the Amorite/Aramean ethnic group (see Deut 26:5), among whom Hebrews perhaps existed as a subculture (see Gen 14:13). We do not know what prompted Terah to take his family from Ur and to set out on a journey with Canaan as the destination (see 11:31). Scholars have tried to identify Terah’s family as part of the Amorite traders or settlers or invaders.

The biblical tradition indicates that Terah and his family, which included Abram and his wife, stopped at Harran in the northwestern part of Mesopotamia and made it their home (11:31) (Harran is located in southeastern Turkey). Genesis 11 ends with the report of Terah’s death in Harran (v 32); we assume that after his father’s death, Abram assumed the responsibility for the

family and its future. The family of Terah seems to have established strong ties to Harran with extended families in this area; Abraham refers to this area as his “country” and his “native land” in 24:4, 7. This area is also known as Aram Naharaim (24:10) and Paddan Aram (28:5) in the biblical records.

Genesis 11:27-32 gives very little information about Abram, except the fact that his wife Sarai was barren (the narrative refers to them as Abram and Sarai until their name change in ch 17 [see vv 5, 15]). We assume that Abram and his family worshipped many gods until Abram’s encounter with Yahweh (12:1); according to Bright, both Ur and Harran were centers of the worship of the moon god (2000, 90). Based on 12:7-8, we may also assume that in the absence of any established religious ritual and priesthood, the head of the family (Abram) served as the priest; this text also indicates that worship included the building of an altar and calling on the name of Yahweh.

Though nothing more is said about Sarai’s barrenness, it is possible to see in the cryptic reference to it in 11:30 the narrator’s strategy to introduce Sarai and Abram as part of the post-Tower of Babel human family. They are a barren couple on a journey, a reminder of the scattering at the end of the Tower of Babel incident (11:9). The divine speech in 12:1-3 is thus heard in the context of barrenness or hopelessness, not only of Sarai and Abram, but of all humanity (see Brueggemann 1982, 116-17, for a brilliant analysis of the metaphor of barrenness and God’s life-giving speech in the biblical tradition). Brueggemann states, “God speaks his powerful word directly into a situation of barrenness. . . . It is a word about the future spoken to this family without any hope of a future” (1982, 117). As we shall see, this word is also God’s gracious word to “all peoples on earth” (12:3).

The narrative (12:1-9) begins with Yahweh’s command (v 1) followed by his promises (vv 2-3). Verses 4-5 give a report of Abram’s obedience to Yahweh’s command, and his family’s journey from Harran and their arrival in Canaan. Verses 6-9 outline the travel itinerary and worship activities of Abram and his family after they arrived in Canaan.

IN THE TEXT

■ **I The LORD had said to Abram.** Though this phrase is often understood as the beginning of a new literary division in Genesis, it actually continues the story of Abram that begins with the genealogy of Terah’s family in 11:27. God has not spoken to humans since his speech to Noah and his sons (see 9:1-17); in that sense, this divine speech signals an important turning point in God’s relationship to humankind.

The text is not clear about the location of this divine speech. The narrative in 11:27-32 seems to suggest Harran; based on Acts 7:2-4, some scholars

place it in Ur. The NIV uses the pluperfect (**had said**) in support of the latter view. However, Gen 11:31 makes clear that Terah took his family, which included Abram and Sarai, and set out from Ur. We follow the logical progression of the narrative in vv 31-32 and assume that God spoke to Abram while he was in Harran, after the death of his father (v 32).

God's speech begins without any introduction or divine self-identification (see 15:1 ff.; 17:1). It is commonly understood that **the LORD** (Yahweh) who speaks in 12:1 is the God who has later made himself known to Moses and Israel by his personal name Yahweh (see Exod 3:1-15; 6:2-5). The narrator does not say why God has chosen Abram as the recipient of his speech or give us any indication of the setting of this speech. The focus of the narrator is on what Yahweh says to Abram. Yahweh's first recorded speech to Abram begins with a command: **Go from your country, your people and your father's household** (Gen 12:1). Yahweh's last recorded encounter with Abraham also began with a command, "Take your son, your only son . . ." (22:2).

The command, **Go**, in Hebrew (*lek lēkā* imperative of *hālak* with the preposition *lē*) conveys the idea of "separating" or "taking leave of" one's familiar surrounding (Sarna 1989, 88). The divine command is followed by three phrases that convey what Abram is being asked to leave behind, in a sequence of less intimate to more intimate; **your country, your people, and your father's household**. **Your country** (*eres*; "earth," "land," "country") is most likely Harran or the upper Mesopotamian area. **Your people** (*mōledet* from *yālad*; "offspring," "descendants," "kindred," etc.) means Abram's distant relatives or perhaps those of the same ethnic background.

Your father's household refers to all who belong to the family of Terah. Yahweh's demand is severe, and Abram's positive response would involve enormous sacrifice; it would be very difficult for him to separate himself from endearing relationships and familiar surroundings. Interestingly, the command in 22:2 was also followed by three phrases that indicate increasing level of intimacy and endearment, "your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac."

Yahweh's command, **Go**, was followed by the announcement of the destination of Abram's journey, **the land** Yahweh **will show** him. Likewise, Yahweh commanded Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering "on a mountain I will show you" (22:2). The journey northward from Ur to Harran was guided by Terah; now, Abram must follow the guidance of Yahweh to arrive at the destination of the journey. Abram will have to journey on until Yahweh will reveal to him that he has reached the destination. The narrative later identifies Canaan as the destination of Abram's journey (see 12:6-9; 15:17-21; 17:8).

■ **2-3** The divine speech continues with a series of **I will** clauses in 12:2-3, each of which contains a specific promise, Yahweh's intention to carry out

specific actions on behalf of Abram. The Hebrew root *brk* (**ble**ss, **ble**ssing) is found five times in these verses, which indicates the importance of blessing in God's promises to Abram. The promises in v 2 are directed to Abram. The promise in v 3a is directed to all who contribute to the well-being of Abram. In v 3b the effect of God's blessing of Abram is extended to all the families of the earth.

In the OT, *brk* often conveys the idea of material and physical prosperity and fruitfulness. In the patriarchal stories, the substance of blessing is often descendants too numerous to count (see "like the dust of the earth" in 13:16; also 15:5). However, the progression of the promise from Abram to **those who ble**ss Abram to **all peoples on earth** implies more than material prosperity and increase of descendants.

In 12:2, God promises to make Abram, a childless person, into a **great nation**. The phrase **great nation** (*gôy gādôl*) conveys the idea of "great in number and significance" (Sarna 1989, 89). This promise thus anticipates the increase of Abram's descendants and their status as a political entity in the world.

The second promise, **I will ble**ss you, is not a secondary promise, but rather the key to all other promises in vv 2-3. Every other blessing promised in these verses hinges on God's bestowal of the power of fertility, growth, material prosperity, success, and greatness upon Abram. What is being promised here is not a one-time action; God's blessing will continue on in the life of Abram and in the history of his descendants.

The promise **I will make your name great** clearly alludes to the failed attempt of the descendants of Noah to "make a name" for themselves (11:4). This promise makes clear that it is Yahweh who makes the names of individuals and nations great in the world. Elsewhere in the OT, Yahweh promises to make the name of David "great, like the names of the greatest men on earth" (2 Sam 7:9; see also 1 Kgs 1:47).

The promise **you will be a ble**ssing extends the scope of Yahweh's promise to Abram to others who would have interactions with him. The Hebrew verb form is an imperative, which means we have here more than a promise but a command (**you are to be/shall be a ble**ssing). Yahweh commands Abram, the recipient of Yahweh's blessing, to live his life as a source of blessing to others.

Though spoken to Abram in the context of his promises to him, Yahweh makes clear that the blessing will have positive and negative impact on others according to the attitude they maintain toward Abram (Gen 12:3a). Yahweh, the giver of all blessings, promises to **ble**ss **those who ble**ss Abram; they do so because they see Abram as the recipient of divine blessing. Blessing others bestow upon Abram is not the same as divine blessing (i.e., power of growth

and prosperity, etc.), but their desire for Abram's well-being and prosperity. They will in turn receive from Yahweh his blessing, the power to succeed and prosper in life, grow and multiply and have material and physical prosperity.

Yahweh also promises to **curse** (*'ārar* conveys the idea of the withholding of any benefit of divine providence) **whoever curses** (*qālal* here conveys the idea of treating with contempt, dishonor, disparage, cause harm, etc.) Abram. Yahweh's treatment of those who mistreat Abram will be severe compared to their treatment of Abram. Scholars find here the promise of divine protection to Abram, who will be a sojourner in a land that does not belong to him. Sarna states, "Because the patriarch will be an unprotected stranger in an alien land, he will have particular need of God's providential care, and whoever mistreats him will be punished with exceptional severity" (Sarna 1989, 89).

The final clause, **and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you**, is a straightforward translation of the Hebrew text (v 3*b*). The promise of blessing extends beyond Abram and reaches others in the world. This final clause conveys the idea that the ultimate purpose of God's blessing of Abram is the bestowal of his blessing of all other peoples in the world, which he intends to carry out through Abram.

Some scholars read the verb form *wenibrēkū* as reflexive, instead of passive, and render it "and shall bless themselves" (in you). The LXX, Vulgate, and early Christian exegetes understood the verb in the passive form and found here the promise of salvation announced to the nations through the blessing God bestowed upon Abraham and his descendants (see Acts 3:25; Gal 3:8). Westermann, who does not see any major conflict between the passive and reflexive meaning of this verb, though he prefers the reflexive reading, states, "God's action proclaimed in the promise to Abraham is not limited to him and his posterity, but reaches its goal only when it includes all the families of the earth" (1995, 152). Von Rad goes even further when he says, "Abraham is assigned the role of a mediator of blessing in God's saving plan, for 'all the families of the earth'" (1972, 160).

■ **4-5 So Abram went** without raising questions. The tradition has no knowledge of a conversation between Yahweh and Abram. The silence of Abram indicates his recognition of the reality that he is under the divine command that requires obedience in order for the promises to become a reality. Without his positive response, the promises would remain as promises given but never received. Abram's obedience to Yahweh's command without asking questions also suggests his conviction that the promise maker has the power to fulfill his promises.

The narrator reports the age of Abram (**seventy-five years old**) here and at other critical moments in his life (see Gen 16:16; 21:5; 25:7). Verse 5 of ch 12 indicates that the caravan included **Sarai** (his wife), **Lot** (his nephew), his

possessions, and his household servants. Without giving any details the narrator simply states, **So Abram went . . . they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there** (vv 4-5). The narrative implies the arrival of Abram in “the land” that God had promised to “show” him (v 1). The narrative is silent on the precise route he took from Harran to Canaan. Most likely he took a route that would have taken him to Hazor in Upper Galilee, from where he could have reached some of the major cities of Canaan.

■ **6** Verses 6-9 report the itinerary of Abram’s journey through the land of Canaan. In v 6 he enters the land and travels **as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem** (lit. *as far as the site of Shechem, at the great tree of Moreh*). The biblical site is identified with a mound known as Tell Balata, located one mile east of modern Shechem (Nabulus). The name of the city combined with reference to a great tree connotes a sacred site within the city of Shechem.

Scholars suggest “oracle giver” as the meaning of the term **Moreh** (thus, “the great tree of the oracle giver”). Some scholars associate this tree and the site with divination or oracle giving before Abram’s arrival at Shechem (see 35:4; Josh 24:26; Judg 9:6, 37 for other associations of Shechem with trees of cultic significance). The text does not imply that Abram was looking for a sacred site to worship God there. Perhaps, he traveled to this site because sacred sites in the ancient times were located near springs and wells (Sarna 1989, 91).

The statement **At that time the Canaanites were in the land** is more than a historical reference; obviously, this statement reflects a reality that existed before the narrative took its final shape. **Canaanites** here is an umbrella term for the native inhabitants of the land of Canaan, most likely made of several ethnic groups. The statement makes clear the relationship of mutual respect and acceptance between Abram and the Canaanites.

■ **7** Genesis 12:7 records the first theophany, God’s appearance to Abram, in the land of Canaan (see also 17:1; 18:1; also to Isaac in 26:2, 24; and Jacob in 35:9). God appears to Abram and promises to give his **offspring** the land he is traveling through (**I will give this land**). Verse 7 of ch 12 thus claims Yahweh as the owner of the land of Canaan, though it is occupied by the Canaanites. Abram acknowledges God’s appearance and his promise by building **an altar**, the first altar to Yahweh in the promised land. Fretheim sees in this act by Abram a “public sign” of his trust in the promise maker that he will indeed give the land to his descendants (1994, 425). It is also likely that this was an act of worship and an expression of gratitude on the part of Abram for Yahweh’s guidance and protection of him and his family during their journey from Harran to Canaan.