Lecture 20: Abraham and Isaac  
History-telling in the Bible

Let’s turn, then, to the cycle of stories about Abraham in Genesis 11.27-25.18. Today I want to draw your attention to a couple features of these stories that drive them forward and give them unity. We’ll begin with a theme that, ironically (since these are stories about the patriarchs) has more to do with their wives.

Mann correctly observes that the story of Abraham begins with the conclusion of the genealogy of chapter 11, which breaks with the chain of statements formulated, “When X had lived d number of years, he became the father of Y.” Rather than continuing that litany of generations, specifying only the first-born son in each case, 11.26 identifies all of Terah’s sons: “When Terah had lived seventy years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran.” And then, vv. 27-31 pick up J’s narrative thread again: “Now these are the descendants of Terah. Terah was the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran was the father of Lot. Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans. Abram and Nahor took wives; the name of Abram’s wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor’s wife was Milcah. She was the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah. Now Sarai was barren; she had no child. Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram’s wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there.” Only then do we get P’s summary of Terah’s life: 32 The days of Terah were two hundred five years; and Terah died in Haran.”

As part of this genealogy we are informed that Abram’s brother, Haran, had a son named Lot, and of course that name will become important in the narrative. And yet, in this context, this notice is unremarkable, given that this is Terah’s family tree.

More noteworthy, however, is the statement about Abram’s wife’s infertility: “Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.” While that notice prepares the way for the central theme in the Abram cycle, notice how abrupt it is. We’re told nothing about Abram, his descent from Terah, his two brothers, or that he was among those Terah took with him on his trip to Canaan. And yet of Sarai we learn she was barren. This piece of information, peculiar at the outset, signals the major obstacle to be overcome in the course of the story.

The theme of overcoming a wife’s barreness – particularly in a struggle with a rival wife or consort – is central to numerous stories in antiquity, including the Bible. And as Whybray notes, it is an essential component of these patriarchal narratives, since the fulfillment of divine promises to the patriarchs focuses especially on offspring.
E.g. Jacob, as you know, married two sisters: Leah, whom Laban deceitfully substituted for her younger sister Rachel, for whom Jacob had agreed to labor for seven hard years. Discovering himself swindled, Jacob arranged to wed Rachel in exchange for another seven years indentured service. The narrator tells us: “So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. He served Laban for another seven years.” The cruelty forced on Leah of being the less-favored wife fuels a feud between the sisters: “When the L\text{ORD} saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren.” Immediately Leah begins producing children, in whom she sees evidence that she has been given leverage in her disadvantaged position: “Leah conceived and bore a son, and she named him Reuben; for she said, “Because the L\text{ORD} has looked on my affliction; surely now my husband will love me.” She conceived again and bore a son, and said, “Because the L\text{ORD} has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also”;

and she named him Simeon. Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, “Now this time my husband will be joined to me, because I have borne him three sons”; therefore he was named Levi.”

Rachel was equally aware of this imbalance: “When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister; and she said to Jacob, “Give me children, or I shall die!” Jacob became very angry with Rachel and said, “Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?”

What ensues is a child-bearing war, with each sister utilizing all the reproductive resources available to her, including their handmaids. Ultimately Rachel becomes fertile and bears her own children, Joseph and Benjamin. But it's Rachel's inability to conceive and the tension that creates with the rival wife that animates the story.

This motif of the barren wife is found also at the outset of the story of Samuel: “There was a certain man…whose name was Elkanah…. He had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. Now this man used to go up year by year from his town to worship and to sacrifice to the L\text{ORD} of hosts at Shiloh…. On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the L\text{ORD} had closed her womb. Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the L\text{ORD} had closed her womb…. Hannah rose and presented herself before the L\text{ORD}…. She made this vow: “O L\text{ORD} of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant [and] will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head.” -- The outcome of that vow was, of course, the birth of Samuel.

My point, once again, is that this motif of the barren wife who is taunted by her rival, but ultimately bears a child is frequent enough in the Bible. And, of course,
that is the motif that stands at the core of the story of Abraham and Sarah, as signaled already by the mention of Sarah as barren in chapter 11. The plot is at once advanced and complicated when she gives her handmaid, Hagar, to her husband, who fathers a child with her. As Mann points out, this solution to the problem of bareness was viewed as legal and appropriate in the ANE; in fact, Rachel has recourse to the same solution when she finds herself unable to bear children, giving her handmaid, Bilhah, to Jacob, by whom he fathered children legally considered Rachel’s own. Neither of these incidents would have been looked at askance by the first readers/hearers, for this was a perfectly acceptable way of dealing with the problem of female infertility.

Equally conforming to form for this motif of the barren wife, is the presence of a rival who taunts her. In the story of Abraham and Sarah, Hagar’s ability to conceive produces more than a child: “[Abram] went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress.” – And so, however acceptable this resolution of the infertility problem was legally, it exacerbated Sarai’s distress.

Her distress is not resolved until she is promised a child by divine visitors, although her initial response to the promise is to scoff: “Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?”

Despite Sarah’s doubts, the promise proves true: “Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him.” What is meant by Abraham’s “old age” is spelled out a few verses later: “Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Now Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”

Sarah’s statement “God has brought laughter for me” is more than simply a register of her joy; it is also a play on the name “Isaac,” which in Hebrew is קִצְיָא, while the word for laughter is קִצְוָא. Even more significantly, the verb “laugh” in Sarah’s assertion “everyone who hears will laugh with me” is קִצְוָא, the same form as the name Isaac. The theme of laughter, both as a response to the promise of a son and as a response to his birth, thread through this story. And with that, Sarah’s bareness is vanquished, allowing her to triumph over her rival, and ultimately kick her out of the house.

And so, ironically, these Patriarchal narratives have as their driving force an issue that circles around the women of the stories and their attempts to secure fertility that will realize a key part of the divine promise spoken to their husbands.
That is the first key element in these narratives.

The other feature of these narratives I want to bring to your attention, beginning today in the Abraham cycle, is a motif that unifies all them all: namely, the LORD’s promises to the Patriarchs. As I mentioned when talking about alternative approaches to understanding how the Torah was composed, these promises have come in for special study, under the suspicion that they form the glue that holds the patriarchal narratives together.

One of the two central elements in those promises is the pledge of numerous progeny. It’s already implicit in the LORD’s summons of Abram at the head of chapter 12: “Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation.” This generalized promise that Abram would become a great nation is made more specific early in the next chapter: “I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted.” The same theme arises in chapter 22, after Abraham has shown his willingness to sacrifice Isaac: “I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore.”

That this promise applies to all of Abraham’s descendants is evident from the reassurance the LORD speaks to Abraham after Sarah has him expel Hagar and Ishmael from the compound: “As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.” It is descent from Abraham that guarantees Ishmael numerous offspring, so as to become a great nation. This promise is reiterated a few verses later to Hagar, after she has been thrown out of the compound and is despairing of her life and that of her son: “Come, lift up the boy…for I will make a great nation of him.” The echo of the LORD’s promise to Abraham at the time of his call is noticeable: like Abram, Ishmael will become a great nation. The promise of numerous progeny so as to form a great nation belongs to all of Abraham’s offspring.

Of course, inevitably the promise of numerous progeny intersects with the overriding threat in the narrative: the infertility of Abram’s wife, Sarah.

This issue is raised most poignantly in a scene placed immediately after Abraham has led an expedition to rescue Lot and his family (among others) from an invading force that had snatched them and their belongings away to the east. Upon returning, Abram refuses to accept any of the spoils of war for himself. The new scene, in chapter 15, tacitly plays on Abram’s rejection of his share of the booty: “After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “You have given me
no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” But the word of
the LORD came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own
issue shall be your heir.” He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven
and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall
your descendants be.” And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him
as righteousness.”

Notice, first, that the divine promise is of a very general sort: “your reward shall
be very great.” In context, this unspecified “great reward” seems to substitute for
the compensation Abram refused to accept for his military services. The problem
Abram raises is, essentially, the worth of such a reward, since he has no son of his
own to inherit it. The only person legally eligible to inherit the reward is a slave
born in his house. The Hebrew is יִתְבַּרְצָו, “a son of my house” and embodies the
idea that, lacking an heir of direct descent, a male who belonged to the household
(here a slave) would inherit the householder’s property. Obviously, Abram’s fear
is that his earthly goods will devolve on someone not born to him. Someone else
would establish their own line in his stead, making use of his goods.

It is with regard to this specific complaint that the LORD reassures Abraham,
“your very own issue shall be your heir.” The Hebrew, somewhat less
euphemistically, says “one who comes forth from your (own) loins”; i.e. it is an
assertion of paternity. While this necessarily implies the birth of a son, the
promise takes on a much broader scope than that, with the LORD using the star-
filled sky to impress on Abram how many descendants he will have.

Notice that Abram’s complaint about lack of a single heir modulates the promise
upward to a multitude of descendants. Thus, even though the problem of Sarah’s
infertility and, consequently, Abram’s problem of not having an heir are central to
J’s story, that plot motif is not directly correlated with the promise of numerous
descendants, since it could be satisfied with the birth of a single child, Isaac. Even
Ishmael and his line are included among Abram’s numerous descendants.

The distinction between Ishmael and Isaac, says the LORD in allaying Abram’s
distress at expelling Hagar and Ishmael, is that “it is through Isaac that offspring
shall be named for you.” Again, this statement is not about the promise of
numerous progeny, as is clear from the fact that the next verse contains God’s
promise to make of Ishmael a great nation, since he is Abram’s offspring. Rather,
the question is through which of these two “offspring will be named” for Abram;
that is, only Isaac’s line will bear Abram’s name.

The issue here is parallel to the divergence of the lines of Jacob and Esau later:
Esau, like Ishmael, was Abram’s descendant, but only through Jacob derives the
nation that claims Abram as father. At the same time, Esau became the progenitor
of Edom. The promise of numerous descendants is fulfilled through all of
Abram’s offspring, but only one line bears his name directly.
Of course, this theme of numerous progeny persists throughout the patriarchal narratives, so that we find it even at the end of the Jacob cycle, when, on his deathbed, Jacob says the following to Joseph: “God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and he blessed me, and said to me, ‘I am going to make you fruitful and increase your numbers; I will make of you a company of peoples, and will give this land to your offspring after you for a perpetual holding.’”  Thus, the theme of numerous progeny is a staple of the patriarchal narratives and a fundamental thread that unites them.

But there is a second component to these promises that is equally important: the promise of land. It appears in that deathbed recollection of Jacob, with the LORD’s promise to “give this land to your offspring after you for a perpetual holding.” It is also found at the beginning of the story of Abram – though more obliquely stated – in the divine summons to “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” It appears again in the next chapter, after Abram and Lot choose different areas to settle, in a set of verses we earlier noted because of their promise of numerous progeny: “Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are…. for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth…. The theme of the gift of land is another staple of the promises made to Abraham and the other patriarchs, and is frequently intertwined with the promise of numerous progeny.

Other biblical passages refer to this same package of pledges as promises made to the ancestors. And yet, J uses these promises in a distinctive way -- in fact, in a way that suggests he develops this motif only from the use of this theme in literature written before his day.

To enable us to perceive this, I want to explore how the ancestors and the promises to them are described elsewhere in the Bible, particularly in the prophets, who often preserve a sense of how traditions in the Torah were viewed in other times and places. I'll start with prophets from before the fall of Jerusalem and, thus, prior to the Babylonian exile, showing that they know only of a promise to the ancestors who were in Egypt, with no mention of ancestors prior to that, and then turn to evidence of traditions from the exilic era, where Abraham is mentioned, for the first time in the Prophets, as an individual in Israel's past.

We’ll begin with references to the ancestors and the promises in the prophets who spoke before the fall of Jerusalem in 586 and the expatriation of most of its people. Because examining every occurrence of this theme in these prophets could entangle us in a number of side issues, I’ll offer a representative sample.

I’ll start with the 8th century prophet Hosea who, while he does not refer to promises to the ancestors, makes some striking statements about Israel’s origins. First, unlike the Torah’s narrative, he views the people’s journey in the wilderness
as a time of fidelity to the LORD; it was only when they entered their land that they became unfaithful. Accordingly, he depicts the LORD considering the possibility of returning the people of the northern kingdom to the wilderness to renew their commitment to the LORD and then receive the land as a gift anew: “Therefore, I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. From there I will give her her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.” – The “Valley of Achor” is a passage way into the land from the Jordan River Valley. Once the relationship is renewed, the people could return with hopes of a better outcome.

Notice the recollection that the wilderness, following the Exodus from Egypt, was the era when the people were faithful to the LORD. Returning the people to the wilderness could provide restoration to faithfulness, after which they could be brought back into the land.

The only reference Hosea makes to Israel’s ancestors comes in chapter 9: “Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel. Like the first fruit on the fig tree, in its first season, I saw your ancestors. But they came to Baal-peor, and consecrated themselves to a thing of shame, and became detestable like the thing they loved.” Baal-peor is located on the eastern side of the Jordan and is recalled by Hosea as the place the people began going astray, serving Baal rather than the LORD. Prior to that, however, the LORD had established a relationship with Israel, claiming her while in the wilderness.

What’s interesting about these two texts is not simply that both of them speak of Israel as faithful to the LORD until they were on the point of reaching their land, but also that both of them presume no history between the LORD and the people prior to the wilderness. While Hosea alludes to the Exodus from Egypt, he speaks quite strikingly of the LORD “finding Israel in the wilderness as one might find an unexpected delight in the wilderness. Hosea reflect no knowledge of stories about a relationship between the people and their God prior to the escape from Egypt. And the only ancestors he speaks of are the people of that age. The reason I note this is that it aligns with an important observation to be made in texts that explicitly refer to promises to the ancestors.

The prophet Ezekiel, like Hosea, gives no hint of knowing about a relationship between the LORD and Israel before the flight from Egypt. He tells the people: “Thus says the Lord GOD: On the day when I chose Israel, I swore to the offspring of the house of Jacob – making myself known to them in the land of Egypt – I swore to them, saying, ‘I am the LORD your God.’ On that day I swore to them that I would bring them out of the land of Egypt into a land that I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most glorious of all lands.”
While Ezekiel refers to Israel as “the house of Jacob,” he doesn’t betray any knowledge of a patriarch by that name having been issued promises of a land. In fact, like Hosea, Ezekiel assumes that the relationship between Israel and the LORD began not long before the people came to their land. Note his specification of when these promises were issued: “On the day when I chose Israel…On that day I swore to them.” But notice also where this choosing and swearing took place: “in the land of Egypt.”

Now notice the content of the oath spoken to Israel in Egypt. It’s not solely about leading them out of Egypt, but also about leading them “into a land that I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey.” Notice how this resonates strongly with the promise to Abram in Genesis 12: “Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” The idea of being led to a land that the Lord had picked out is notably similar.

Later, in chapter 20, the LORD recalls, “Moreover I swore to them in the wilderness that I would not bring them into the land that I had given them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most glorious of all lands, because they rejected my ordinances and did not observe my statutes, and profaned my sabbaths; for their heart went after their idols. Nevertheless my eye spared them, and I did not destroy them or make an end of them in the wilderness. I said to their children in the wilderness, Do not follow the statutes of your parents, nor observe their ordinances, nor defile yourselves with their idols.”

The ensuing verses speak of the first generation passing and their children acting just as wickedly. Ezekiel is then instructed to continue this litany of the people’s sins as follows: “Say to them, “Thus says the Lord GOD: In this again your ancestors blasphemed me, by dealing treacherously with me. For when I had brought them into the land that I swore to give them, then wherever they saw any high hill or any leafy tree, there they offered their sacrifices and presented the provocation of their offering; there they sent up their pleasing odors, and there they poured out their drink offerings.”

What’s intriguing about these verses is that both generations – those to whom the promises were originally given and their children, who equally violated the LORD’s command – are referred to simply as “your ancestors.” “Your ancestors” serves as a blanket designation of any group that has lived prior to the present generation.

It is in that light, most likely, that we should read this divine instruction regarding what the contemporary of Ezekiel, Jeremiah, must say to his people: “You shall say to them, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Cursed be anyone who does not heed the words of this covenant, which I commanded your ancestors when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, from the iron-smelter, saying,
‘Listen to my voice, and do all that I command you. So shall you be my people, and I will be your God,⁤ that I may perform the oath that I swore to your ancestors, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey, as at this day.’”

Notice that the ancestors here are, in the first instance, those the LORD brought out of Egypt with the order to obey his every command (i.e. the giving of his Torah). But in recalling his address of those “ancestors,” he also speaks of “the oath that I swore to your ancestors, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey.” I.e. Jeremiah is told to remind his people of the dire consequences for anyone not keeping the commands given their ancestors. And he quotes what he said to those ancestors, including a reference to “the oath that I swore to your ancestors,” who would thus be some generation prior to the Exodus.

While our familiarity with the Patriarchal narratives makes it natural for us to assume that those ancestors were Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, that is not necessarily the group Jeremiah has in mind. Recall the way we saw Ezekiel use “your ancestors” to refer to any earlier generation. Moreover, never in the Patriarchal narratives do we find the land promised them described as “flowing with milk and honey.” Whatever Jeremiah has in mind, he is not drawing directly off the tradition of promises embedded in the Patriarchal narratives.

We do find the description of the land as “flowing with milk and honey” in the books of Exodus and Numbers. Moreover, it appears in the words of Jeremiah’s contemporary, Ezekiel. But he was also the one to describe that promise as uttered when the LORD chose Israel in the land of Egypt.

Accordingly, when Jeremiah refers to a promise of a land flowing with milk and honey addressed to the ancestors of those with whom the LORD established a covenant after the Exodus from Egypt, he is not necessarily thinking of the patriarchs of Genesis.

What this survey suggests is that prior to the exile a tradition existed about a promise of land that was made to those in Egypt, prior to the Exodus. It was that group the LORD chose to be his people and it was to them that the land was deeded.

Now let's consider traditions from two prophets active either at the beginning of the exile or towards its conclusion, who attest an impulse to appeal to Abraham as a paradigm for encouragement in the face of Jerusalem’s fall. We'll begin with Ezekiel who, while his work overlaps the fall of Jerusalem, also attests ideas afoot in that period. Ezekiel, on the one hand, denied the appeal of those still in the land to the story of Abraham as a single individual who possessed the land, deducing that they, being many, were certain to possess it (Ezek 33): ⁵⁴Son of man, the inhabitants of these waste places in the land of Israel keep saying, “Abraham was only one man, yet he got possession of the land; but we are many; the land is surely given us to possess.” ⁵⁵Therefore say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: You eat flesh with the blood, and lift up your eyes to your idols, and shed blood;
shall you then possess the land?” Thus, Ezekiel evidences this impulse afoot in his day, even if he denies the validity of their argument on moral grounds. But even then, notice that there is no explicit mention of a promise that had been vouchsafed to Abraham.

On the other hand, the prophet who speaks in Isaiah 40-55 actively encourages his hearers to take their ancestor Abraham’s case as paradigmatic for how God could multiply them: “1 Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the LORD. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. 2 Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many.” Notice once more, though, that there is no suggestion that a promise of numerous progeny had been given to Abraham. Abraham merely becomes the basis for speaking of the possibility of divine blessing that multiplies a people.

On the other hand, appeals to Abraham regarding both possession of the land and numerous offspring are quite understandable in a period when both are threatened for Israel, and provide an intelligible environment for the infusion of promises of a land uttered during the people’s Exodus from Egypt into stories about the patriarchs. What J was doing was utilizing those stories to root hope for the future in the age of Abraham. Abraham becomes the embodiment of Israel in the past, receiving promises that are passed down through his descendants.

Supporting that hypothesis is the observation that, on the one hand, the promises cited by the pre-exilic prophets are conditional, as in Jeremiah 11, where the Lord recalls this promise to the ancestors: “‘Listen to my voice, and do all that I command you. So shall you be my people, and I will be your God, 5 that I may perform the oath that I swore to your ancestors, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey, as at this day.’”

By contrast, the promises of land in the patriarchal narratives are unconditional: the land will be deeded to them perpetually. This is very much in keeping with the situation of the exile, where the question was what would happen to Israel’s land: was it simply forfeit? The answer given by J through the infusion of these promises is that the land has been unconditionally deeded to Israel.

Well, how did J go about telling the story of Abraham, besides infusing the promises? We don’t have time to pursue every indication of his activity, but I do want to note a motif J uses throughout the patriarchal narratives: the theme of migrations by an ancestor and his family. We’ve already noted that the story of Lot and his daughters in the cave accounts for the origins of the Ammonites and Moabites, who lived to the east of Israel. An additional thing to notice about that story is where it takes place.

Chapter 13 tells of the separation of Abram and Lot, due to the numbers of people and flocks each had. As Mann notes, Abram makes the magnanimous offer
to his nephew to choose which parcel of land he wanted, and he would take the other. J relates the outcome as follows: “Lot looked about him, and saw that the plain of the Jordan was well watered everywhere like the garden of the L ORD, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar; this was before the L ORD had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.” So Lot chose for himself all the plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward; thus they separated from each other. Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the Plain and moved his tent as far as Sodom.

There are two noteworthy issues: First, the location: Lot’s territory lay to the east, in the Plain of the Jordan, towards Zoar, where Lot will eventually escape during the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Zoar has been identified as located just south of the Dead Sea.

The second noteworthy issue in this set of verses is the state of the territory Lot chose: it was “well watered everywhere like the garden of the L ORD.” But the narrator also adds that this was the state of affairs “before the L ORD had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.” By implication, this tract of land was not as desirable after the destruction of the cities.

It seems likely, therefore, that wherever we peg Zoar, the land Lot and his daughters take refuge in subsequently is the arid territory east of the Jordan river valley, whose unattractiveness is attributed to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The importance of all this is that the nation of Moab was located just in this territory to the east of the Jordan valley, so that Lot’s flight with his daughters and the birth of their children by him places the origins of Moab in the territory Moab comes to inhabit. Ammon arises in the territory just to the north of that, so that the migration of Lot and the birth to him of sons who become the patriarchs of these nations explain the origins of these neighbors of Israel in the places they come to occupy.

The expulsion of Ishmael from the camp of Abraham has a similar outcome. God’s comfort to the despairing Hagar, is given through an angel in these words: “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.”

The wilderness of Paran is in the Sinai, where the descendants of Ishmael formed the ethnic group we know as the Arabs. These descendants show up in a narrative later in Genesis, the story of Joseph being sold into slavery: “When some
Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the *Ishmaelites* for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.”

In these two instances in the Abraham cycle we can see J playing out ethnographic concerns, even as he did in his Table of the Nations in chapter 10. We'll see him do the same thing next time, when we turn to the stories about Jacob.