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**LITERARY REFLECTIONS OF GOD:
THE CHARACTERIZATION OF YHWH IN THE
ABRAHAMIC SAGA**

by

Elizabeth M. Mason, B.A. Honours

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Religion

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

May 5, 1995

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**LITERARY REFLECTIONS OF GOD: THE CHARACTERIZATION OF YHWH IN
THE ABRAHAMIC SAGA**

submitted by Elizabeth M. Mason, B.A.
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Robert Polzin, Thesis Supervisor

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date

ABSTRACT

The title of this work is **Literary Reflections of God: The Characterization of YHWH in the Abrahamic Saga**. This thesis covers two main topics. The first chapter deals with a general examination of literary theories concerning characterization. Chapters Two and Three apply these theories to Genesis 12-23, 25:1-18, specifically, to an examination of the characterization of God therein. This project is often carried out in indirect methods, for instance, God's character is seen through what other characters say about Him and how they respond to him. He is also examined directly by studying what He says and does. The conclusion proposes that the God of the Abrahamic saga is multifaceted and that an interesting and much greater knowledge of Him has been reached from this literary analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

Every thesis has a starting point which should be clearly delineated. It begins with questions which require answers. But how do we build a platform on which to base the answers we find? Do we even find answers or do we merely fit the study to the answers we already have? These questions are basic to all researchers and must consequently be kept in the forefront of all "conclusions".

There are many topics of interest that can be studied in relation to the Bible. The general topic I have chosen is characterization. This topic in and of itself has proven to be complex in its application, implications, and comprehensibility. Many noted scholars such as Rimmon-Kenan, Alter, Sternberg, and Bal, have all made attempts to explore just what is characterization. None of the results is totally comprehensive or completely satisfactory, although all add to a greater understanding of characterization.

Having chosen a broad theoretical theme the next step was to find a text to which to apply the literary theories studied. The narrower topic chosen was an examination of the characterization of God in the Abraham saga. This topic is both interesting and difficult for various reasons. First, the topic of characterization itself is complex. Second, the biblical being known

as יהוה is also complex and is often regarded as unlike other characters found either in the Bible itself or other literature. יהוה is truly unique and not a great deal of work has been done examining the literary characterization of this entity.

One of the most important things that must be done in any research is a definition of the parameters of the work to be studied. In this regard I have chosen to concentrate on Genesis 12-25 (excluding chapter 24). I have not chosen to include the genealogies in Genesis 11 or 25 as I did not feel they were of particular relevance in characterizing God.

Although at times it may seem as if Abraham is the dominant character under examination, the truly important character is in fact יהוה. As this entity is unusual in many aspects, He will often be approached by indirect methods, such as through an analysis of the characterization of Abraham and Sarah, as well as by looking at what is said about and by Him¹ in the story. Looking at the character of יהוה through the characterization of the human cast will mean that His characterization will be doubly indirect. Please keep this in mind in Chapters Two and Three.

1

When referring to יהוה in the third person or equivalent, I will use an upper case "H". The purpose of this is just a method of identification.

The first chapter will examine in some detail some of the theories of characterization that are available. These theories will be as recent as possible, but I will also examine some ideas put forth by earlier scholars such as Hochman.

Chapters Two and Three will then apply these theories to the actual biblical text in an attempt to understand both text and theory better. Chapter Two will deal with the text of Genesis 12-17, from the call of Abraham to the institution of circumcision as a sign of the covenant. Genesis 18-25 will be the material dealt with in chapter Three.

One topic I would like to address before beginning my thesis is the assumption that the Bible can be studied like any other piece of literature. This is a vital assumption if I am going to apply techniques from the study of narrative to the biblical text. If the Bible is in some way different then these methods are not legitimate. Robert Alter, endorsing the application of narrative techniques to the Bible, defines literary criticism as

the manifold varieties of minutely discriminating attention to the artful use of language, to the shifting play of ideas, conventions, tone, sound, imagery, syntax, narrative viewpoint, compositional units, and much else; the kind of disciplined attention, in other words, which through a whole spectrum of critical approaches has illumined, for example, the poetry of Dante, the plays of Shakespeare, the novels of Tolstoy (Alter 12).

These are all things that may be fruitfully applied to the study of the Bible.

Some may fear that examining the Bible in the same manner one would study Proust or Joyce demeans the biblical text. Gros Louis says "the issue, in a sense, may be whether we see literary criticism of the Bible as a further extension of its secularization and therefore as damaging; or whether we see literary criticism as a new means for introducing readers of the Bible to its richness" (Gros Louis 17). I would like to echo Bal when she says "the Bible is undeniably literature" (Bal 71).

I believe that a literary examination of the text, in no way invalidates it as a sacred work. My study of the characterization of God is meant as an intellectual exercise, and not as a way to denigrate other people's beliefs in God. My intention is to try to understand the יהוה found in the literary saga of Abraham, who He may be, what He may want, and why. For those who hold the Bible as sacred, and those who do not, I hope my work may offer new insight into the God I find in Genesis 12-25. This aim is also supported by Alter. He states

the implicit theology of the Hebrew Bible dictates a complex moral and psychological realism in biblical narrative because God's purposes are always entrained in history, dependent on the acts of individual men and women for their continuing realization. *To scrutinize biblical personages as fictional characters is to see them more sharply in the*

multifaceted, contradictory aspects of their human individuality, which is the biblical God's chosen medium for his experiment with Israel and history (Alter 12).

My desire is information not degradation.

The difficulties of discussing characterization as a viable topic have already been alluded to. The difficulties of addressing God as a literary character was the theme of a recent issue of the journal *SEMELIA*. In "The Character(ization) of God in 2 Samuel 7:1-17," Kenneth Craig concisely states the major problem with studying the characterization of God. He says,

one should bear in mind that the characterization of God represents a special case. The portrayal of God is unique because most aspects typically associated with character - appearance, social status, place of residence, etc. - have no bearing on God at all (Craig 160).

In this he agrees with Meir Sternberg (Sternberg 323).

Another obstacle involves the extratextual situation. No one approaches the Bible without some prior conceptions of who or what God is. These ideas necessarily colour what a reader is looking for and finds in the biblical text (Thompson 185).

Some authors feel that another problem is that although the human cast of the Bible shows signs of variability and change, "God tends to constancy" (Sternberg 324; Thompson 186). There is only one portrait of God in the

Bible and this never changes (Thompson 186). Although there is some truth in the idea of a constant nature, I don't agree with it one hundred percent. However, only a careful reading of the text will confirm the validity of each view.

Keeping in mind the difficulties inherent in studying literary characterization in general and the characterization of God in particular, let us now turn to the body of the thesis.

CHAPTER ONE

CHARACTERIZATION AND LITERARY THEORY

INTRODUCTION

The substance of this chapter is a summary of literary theory especially concerned directly with character and characterization. With the huge corpus of literary theory texts available today, this may seem a relatively simple task. However, when it comes to studying character and characterization there is no unified, satisfying, comprehensive theory available. John Frow states, "the concept of character is perhaps the most problematic and the most undertheorized of the basic categories of narrative theory" (Frow 227).

Indeed,

it is not possible to face a text and announce "I shall now talk about character" in the same way that one might say "I shall now talk about plot" or "metaphor." For several reasons - not the least of which is the absence of a thoughtful critical tradition - character is much more difficult to talk about than most other literary concepts (Wilson 730).

These are just a sample of the views regarding the complexity of characterization. I would contend that despite the difficulty such a study might present, it is also one of the most interesting aspects of literary or narrative theory as it offers a dynamic and relatively untouched area for study.

In spite of the interest character has for the reader, it has often been asked if the study of character is a viable endeavour at all. Baruch Hochman says,

over the past fifty years the characters of literature have, in the works of our most innovative writers, often been reduced to schematic angularity, vapid ordinariness, or allegorical inanity. The great writers of early modernism fulfilled the Romantic program of individualism and created a gallery of unprecedentedly complex characters, but their heirs have deliberately subordinated the role of character in their work (Hochman 13).

These heirs - structuralists, post-structuralists, and post-modern theorists, - have generally regarded character as a less than central topic, if they consider it at all. Rawdon Wilson, Seymour Chatman, and Gerard Genette, among others, have come to see the necessity of dealing with character if their theories are to be more comprehensive.

Since the title of this thesis is **Literary Reflections of God: The Characterization of יהוה in the Abrahamic Saga**, let us assume that character *is* a viable and fruitful topic of study. Given this assumption, let us now turn to theories of character and characterization proposed by some scholars, notably Jonathan Culler, Rawdon Wilson, Mieke Bal, and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan. In addition, I will briefly mention other scholars who may have a significant bearing on the topic at hand.

CHARACTERIZATION

Mimesis

Most, if not all, literary critics note the impact of characters on the reader. Viewing literary characters as mimetic - "with imitative representation of nature or human behaviour" - causes the most contention for structuralists. How do you keep the richness of the most memorable and person-like characters while still maintaining their place in and utter reliance on the texts in which they are created? They cannot exist without their literary context, yet they are often spoken of in the same manner as real, live *human beings*.

One problem is this: are characters *people* or *words* (Rimmon-Kenan 31)? The dilemma is succinctly presented by Mudrick when he says

the 'purist' argument - in the ascendancy nowadays among critics - points out that characters do not exist at all except insofar as they are part of the images and events which bear and move them, that any effort to extract them from their context, and to discuss them as if they are real human beings is a sentimental misunderstanding of literature. The 'realist' argument - on the defensive nowadays - insists that characters acquire, in the course of an action, a kind of independence from the events in which they live, and that they can be usefully discussed at some distance from their context (Rimmon-Kenan 31).

The realistic argument views characters as human beings and removes them

from their narrative habitation. Adherents of this view have gone so far as to build lives for the character beyond information provided in the text, traditionally employing theories from psychology and psychoanalysis to do this (Rimmon-Kenan 32). No matter how realistic a character may appear, it seems farfetched to project a life for him/her beyond that provided by the text.

I noted previously that hardline structuralists have tended to dismiss or sidestep this topic of study, and Culler offers an explanation of why this is so. Structuralists distance themselves from character because "the general ethos of structuralism runs counter to the notions of individuality and rich psychological coherence which are often applied to the novel" (Culler 230), and this especially applies to the characters within it. In his article "Spectacle Binding", John Frow regards Grivel as a representative of the predominant view of structuralism that "character is no-one/is not a person" (Frow 230).

Since literature usually focuses on people (or human substitutes, i.e. **The Wind in the Willows**), most fabulas² will deal with some relation of a psychological or ideological nature (Bal 36) portrayed between or through the

2

Bal uses this term to mean "a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by the actors" (Bal 5).

characters. Psychological relations take precedence in criticism with a psychological or psychoanalytical bent. This occurs when analysts wish to examine how actors relate to one another. The ideological relations of actors is important because all actors must deal with the ideology of the narrative worlds they inhabit (Bal 37). In any text one type of relationship may take precedence over the other, but both are important when they occur together. These relationships also link characters to their human counterparts, and begin to build a bridge between hardline structuralism and the hardline "realist" view of character.

Rawdon Wilson introduces his article "The Bright Chimera" by reporting a supposed dialogue with his daughter. This eight-year old seems to have a solid grasp of literary character. She, like many other readers, realizes that although characters are not real they are mimetic. A paradox? Perhaps but a truth, I believe, nonetheless. Characters have reality within the text as well as within the imagination of the reader, they can have an identifiable substance.

Wilson begins his discussion with a dialogue on the nature of consciousness that is integrally tied to character. It is the characters that seem most conscious that are often the most memorable. Wilson does not

agree that it is the same as the consciousness of human beings (Wilson 729). He feels that "the trouble with writing about the representation of consciousness in literature lies in the fictiveness of fiction . . ." (Wilson 730). He says that the consciousness of a fictional character needs to be *schematic* (Wilson 730), that is, *planned* in some manner. Human consciousness is definitely not planned, and this is one of the ways characters depart from mimesis.

Wilson also says that characters have been seen as "autonomous, artificial beings, with no more reality than, say, a metaphor" (Wilson 733). What this implies is the artificiality and constructedness of character and what is wrong with that? This view illustrates yet another way characters differ from people. Character *is* in some way built by the author during the act of writing and then rebuilt by the reader during reading. In this way a character is constructed. Regarding the artificiality of characters, Wilson comments, "they lack both the essentials and inessentials of actual persons: complete bodies, a full range of thoughts and feelings, integrated psychologies, and so forth" (Wilson 734). Since characters are constructs in a narrative, there is an element of truth in this view. Another point he makes is that "one may think about characters *as if* they were actual" (Wilson 734). That is to say, it *is*

necessary for readers to view characters and human people as analogous, at least in the readers' imaginations.

Wilson's article goes on to discuss in some detail W.J. Harvey's book **Character and the Novel**. Harvey's work is based on a lifelike view of character but it also approaches the artificiality of it. Wilson introduces what Harvey calls "constitutive categories." These four categories, time, identity, causality, and freedom, are inherent in everything that we experience in life. They may be said to typify and structure all human experience and they should shape the mimetic character in narrative as well.

For if one is to arrive at that "inevitable artifice" it will surely be, partly at least, in terms of isolating the structure of the character's experience . . . The experience of a character is . . . a structured and ordered immersion. Fictional experience, of course is studied, selected, ordered, and differentiated: one must seek the categories of the experience and the relationships between them (Wilson 738).

These experiences are made up of time, identity, causality, and freedom, thus influencing the final product of characterization, almost as they would influence human development, but from a constructed position.

The points Wilson makes are useful in analyzing character. We *do* extract characters from texts and construct "personalities" for them as we read. We do this by viewing them, whether consciously or not, as human

people, as mimetic. Human they are not. But it is profitable and frequently necessary to use terms of reference when we define the people we know to identify the characters we meet in literature.

Naming

One area in which literary characters may reflect their human counterparts is in their names. Every person and most characters have names. It is one of our ways to identify individuals both in life and literature. An important cohesive element in character is the proper name (Rimmon-Kenan 39). According to Barthes (quoted by Rimmon-Kenan)

the proper name enables the person to exist outside the semes, whose sum nonetheless constitutes it entirely. As soon as a Name exists (even a pronoun to flow toward and fasten onto), the semes become predicates, inductors of truth, and the Name becomes a subject (Rimmon-Kenan 39).

The name is probably the key factor in character extraction. Once this has been established, the reader has a hanger on which to place traits pulled from the narrative. The more traits that are drawn out, the fuller the characterization becomes.

Northrop Frye recognizes the value of names, designating four categories of stock figures³ to which all characters can be compared.

Characters need not fit into any of his four divisions but their creation and the readers' perceptions of them are accompanied by a knowledge of the stock figures through cultural codes. This helps the reader place the character into a category of general names such as "hero" or "villain."

Barthes investigates "the process by which, during reading, various details are combined and interpreted so as to form characters" (Culler 236). These details or *semes* are extracted from the text by the reader's use of his/her cultural codes. This process also involves naming. Barthes said, "to read is to struggle to name, to subject the sentences of a text to a semantic transformation" (Rimmon-Kenan 36). Chatman adapts Barthes' theory to his own use. For him "character is a paradigm of traits, 'trait' being defined as a 'relatively stable or abiding personal quality and 'paradigm' suggesting that the set of traits can be seen 'metaphorically, as a vertical assemblage intersecting the syntagmatic chain of events that comprise the plot' " (Rimmon-Kenan 37). By giving names to the details, the reader puts them into a form that can be built up and used to develop a character. By placing a proper name, such as Bill, on a character, a place is provided to which the details extracted during

reading can adhere. The proper name is not the character but a way for readers to easily sum up the parts that constitute the whole.

But, how do the traits coalesce under the proper name? According to Rimmon-Kenan, "the main principles of cohesion are repetition, similarity, (and) contrast" (Rimon-Kenan 39). Repetitive actions help define a character. Additionally, comparable actions occurring at different times aid in characterization. Contrasts in the character's actions also permit a reader to develop the characterization of that character. These categories can help to develop the cohesiveness of a character.

Though specific views vary, all these scholars value names. Names are the cues the reader first picks up on. Later (s)he attaches traits and characteristics to them. The name is usually a means by which a character begins to find definition in the narrative. "Every mention of the identity of the character contains information that limits other possibilities" (Bal 83). By naming a character its sex is usually determined (an exception would be a name like Dale which could be male or female). Sometimes names even provide family background, religious affiliation or social status. Patrick Macdonald III is *likely* to be an aristocratic Irish Roman Catholic. It is thus through names that characters begin to form and have meaning for the reader.

Character Types

In Narratology Mieke Bal divides narrative into three sections: fabula, story and text⁴. It is within fabula and story that character occurs. Under fabula these literary entities are called *actors*, only becoming *characters* in the story. Bal uses fabula to mean "a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors (Bal 5). The events are something that cause a conversion from one state to another, and actors are "agents that perform actions" (Bal 5). Bal discusses actors in relation to the things they cause to happen or that happen to them. To discuss which actors are relevant or important Bal makes a distinction between actors who act and those "who have no functional part in the structures of the fabula because they do not cause or undergo *functional* events" (Bal 5). The latter may be ignored for the nonce.

Bal states that the division of characters into the categories of round and flat, as predominant in literary criticism, is problematic. The round character is traditionally thought to be "like 'complex' persons who undergo change in the course of the story, and remain capable of surprising the reader.

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I have already defined fabula, see footnote 2. 'Story' is "a fabula that is presented in a certain manner" and 'text' is a structured whole composed of language (Bal 5).

Round characters are defined by having "more than one quality and developing in the course of the action" (Rimmon-Kenan 40). Flat characters "in their purest form, are constructed around a single idea or quality" (Rimmon-Kenan 40); they are "stable, stereotypical characters that exhibit/contain nothing surprising" (Bal 81). Forster's division of round and flat characters is a very limited and limiting distinction that is inadequate for a comprehensive view of characterization.

Despite the limitation inherent in "flat" and "round" categorizations, they can be useful in an initial survey of the characters encountered. By sorting properly named and other characters into flat and round, a reader can begin the process of characterization. An initially flat character may develop during the course of reading and a character that originally looks fully developed may turn out to be static. Notwithstanding the limitations because of these narrow distinctions, they can be usefully employed - to a degree.

THE TEXTUAL PRESENTATION OF CHARACTER

I have discussed mimetic characters, naming, and types of characters. It is time now to talk about how characters are presented, that is shown, in a text.

In chapter 6 of **Genesis of Secrecy** Frank Kermode begins by saying that character is a "source of opacity, of complex, various and never definitive interpretation" (Kermode 75). Despite its opacity, one of the keys in trying to unlock character is understanding that character and narrative are interdependent, meaning that stories need agents and that agents need stories. Kermode also states that "the text of the story is spangled with signs that may be read as part of the evidence from which we habitually construct character" (Kermode 77). These signs are the details or cultural codes that Culler discusses and that help present character to the reader.

On the initial presentation of a character very little is usually known about him/her. In chapter five Rimmon-Kenan examines two basic types of textual indicators that present character: **direct definition and indirect presentation** (Rimmon-Kenan 59). Direct definition means that a character's traits are explicitly stated somehow, perhaps through adjectives. How do we know what these traits are? *A character* may describes itself (Bal 89). Generally a self-description is questionable unless substantiated by another character or a reliable narrator. The *narrator* may also dispense information about characters (Bal 89). When assessing the value of a narrator's statements, the reader must decide whether the narrator is reliable. Because a

reader tends to accept the opinions of a reliable narrator, this kind of presentation may appear to give a static impression of the character. However, this static aspect may be reduced by a gradual revelation of traits. Thus a character is presented no less reliably but more subtly (Rimmon-Kenan 60).

Indirect presentation may be achieved in a variety of ways. Indirectly the *reader* assigns characteristics from what a character does (Bal 89). If a character does something once as opposed to repeatedly, the action may present a dynamic character. Habitual actions tend to seem static (Rimmon-Kenan 61). However, relevant characteristics or data about the character that are repeated become more prominent to the reader. *Repetition* becomes a key factor in developing a character's image. Thus, "the *accumulation* of characteristics causes odd facts to coalesce, complement each other, and then form a whole: the image of a character" (Bal 85).

Repetitive actions that can be grouped together may form a pattern of behaviour. Each group of repeated activities can be compared or contrasted with similar actions and this helps fill in the picture the reader has of a character. If, after further reading, a trait such as anger is recurrent it can be defined as a character trait. These traits may be made explicit or left to the

reader to uncover. As traits combine and adhere to an entity, a character forms (Rimmon-Kenan 38).

A second way to show characters indirectly is through an examination of his/her speech acts. Such speeches may be public or private (Rimmon-Kenan 63). Both the form and content of the speech may be illuminating. The form of a character's words help to differentiate him/her from other characters and the narrator. It can also tell things about the character such as origin, social status, or profession. A simple example of this comes from Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Professor Higgins is able to locate exactly Eliza's origins by listening to her pronunciation during their conversation.

External appearance is a third indicator of indirect characterization. Under this heading a character's inherited physicality must be distinguished from controllable factors. Height is beyond control but cleanliness is not. Unavoidable or unchangeable physical characteristics are of a different nature from changeable ones. Rimmon-Kenan says that "while the first group characterizes through contiguity alone, the second has additional causal overtones" (Rimmon-Kenan 65).

Bal identifies the problem of the "extra-textual situation" (Bal 81). This also relates to the "direct or indirect knowledge of certain characters"

(Bal 81). If a person of historical reality is used as a character in a narrative, what is known from life will influence what the reader finds in the text, or vice versa. This is a point to keep in mind when attempting to characterize God.

I will now turn to other aspects of narrative that may have some relevance to the study of characterization.

NARRATIVE AGENT

Mieke Bal says that "a narrative text is a text in which a narrative agent tells a story" (Bal 119). But what is a narrative agent? Some call this agent the author or the implied author. Bal, and others, calls the narrative agent a *narrator*. Every reader from grade school onward is aware of the literary entity known as the narrator. Narrators tell stories. This is elementary school knowledge but many scholars feel it is too basic.

"Who tells the story? The narrator or the author?" Scholars find it important to discuss topics such as the real author and the implied author, the real reader and the implied reader, and the narrator and the narratee. These entities are related like this:

REAL AUTHOR > IMPLIED AUTHOR > (NARRATOR) = (NARRATEE) < IMPLIED READER <

(Chatman 151).

The real author is the historical person who actually wrote the narrative. Its twin is the real reader who is also an actual person. These two sets of people are beyond the bonds of the narrative, and are not generally discussed because of the inherent difficulty in recovering *real* persons from a narrative work. Instead, theorists tend to discuss the implied reader and the implied author.

The implied author is a construct extracted from the narrative (Chatman 148). Since the implied author is artificial, the real and implied author are not the same being. Chatman says that the implied author "has no voice, no direct means of communicating" (Chatman 148) with the reader or narratee but that it "establishes the norms of the narrative" (Chatman 149). The implied reader is another construct of the text. It is "the audience presupposed by the narrative itself" (Chatman 150). These entities are present in all narrative according to Chatman.

Chatman says that neither the narrator nor the narratee need be in every text (Chatman 150). When they are absent the implied author and reader are responsible for all communication (Rimmon-Kenan 88). "The narrator's

presence derives from the audience's sense of some demonstrable communication. If it feels it is being told something, it presumes a teller" (Chatman 147). Can a narrative be communicated without a teller? Does it not seem *necessary* to have a narrator relay the story? The narratee would be the recipient of the narrator's tale. Rimmon-Kenan says that the narratee is "the agent which is at the very least implicitly addressed by the narrator" (Rimmon-Kenan 89). If one exists, logically so must the other.

Rimmon-Kenan disagrees with Chatman on several points. First, she says that if the implied author is

to be consistently distinguished from the real author and the narrator, the notion of the implied author must be de-personified, and is best considered a set of implicit norms rather than as a speaker or a voice (i.e. a subject). It follows, therefore that the implied author cannot literally be a participant in the narrative communication situation" (Rimmon-Kenan 88).

It is not possible for the implied author to communicate with *any* type of reader.

Second, Rimmon-Kenan says that the narrator and the narratee should be considered as obligatory and not optional literary entities. In the end, she rejects the relevance of Chatman's implied author and implied reader. For her, the only relevant entities are the real author and reader, and the narrator

and narratee (Rimmon-Kenan 89).

My understanding both encompasses and disagrees with these theorists. I believe that the narrator and the narratee are the only two entities that are present in every narrative situation. You cannot possibly have a narrative without someone to relay it. The real author wrote it but (s)he cannot be said to be the one telling the story *now* as the reader is reading. As a historical being (s)he may not be alive and is definitely not physically present in the room as a person is reading. The real reader reads the book but the author had to write it for the implied reader because (s)he could not have known with certainty who all the real readers would be. (S)he would just have had general characteristics in mind for the type of person who might be interested in this story. The artificial implied author may be present or not in any particular story, so this being cannot be counted on to tell the story, therefore it is only the narrator and its recipient that can be considered consistently in every narrative.

This is especially true in the Bible, a book written by many hands over several centuries. The real author is not one but many and cannot hope to be accurately recovered after so many ages. The real reader has changed from the days of the Bible's inception to the present and so is of little use. The

implied author and the implied reader are equally useless, I believe, in studying the *biblical* text⁵. Therefore it is to the narrator and its counterpart, the narratee, that I will turn.

Types of Narrators

Since it is narrators who relay the narrative we must examine the different types of narrators which may be present in any individual text.

There are two points that need to be examined. The grammatical person of the narrator is the first point. The second is the perceptibility of the narrator.

Does the narrator speak from a first, second or third person position?

The second person position, 'you', is not impossible but improbable so I will concentrate on "I" and "(s)he". Typical first person narration has been considered that in which the narrator speaks of itself as "I" and is present within the story it is telling. Third person narration tells the story of another character, a "he" or "she". Of these distinctions Genette says,

these common locutions seem to me inadequate, in that they stress variation in the element of the narrative situation that is in fact invariant - to wit, the presence (explicit or implicit) of the "person" of the narrator. This presence is invariant because the narrator can be in his

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By this I do not mean to imply that the implied author and reader are never of any use. They frequently are and must be spoken of in reference to reliable narration. However, once the reliability of biblical narration is established, these entities may cease to be of consideration.

narrative . . . *only* in the first person . . ." (Genette 243),
with rare exceptions to this convention.

Mieke Bal agrees that distinctions between first and third person are
ungainly. In *Narratology* she states,

in principle, it does not make a difference *to the status of the narration* whether a narrator refers to itself or not. As soon as there is language, there is a speaker who utters it; as soon as those linguistic utterances constitute a narrative text, there is a narrator, a narrating subject. From a grammatical point of view, this is *always* a 'first person' (Bal 121).

She defines her "I"s as **external** and **character-bound** narrators. The
character-bound narrator is narrating from a position within the story.

External narrators never refer to themselves as characters within the story,
telling their tales from beyond the confines of the narrative.

Bal's two distinctions can be contrasted with Genette's four types of
narrators. He says that narrators can be either present or absent from the
narrative and calls them respectively **homodiegetic** and **heterodiegetic**⁶. He
says that "absence is absolute, but presence has degrees" (Genette 245) and

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'Homodiegetic' means that the narrator is present in the story (diegesis) usually as a character. The heterodiegetic narrator is external to the story. The extra-heterodiegetic narrator is external to the story and the narration, whereas the hetero-intradiegetic narrator is external to the story but internal to the narration. The extra-homodiegetic narrator is external to the narration but internal to the story, and the intra-homodiegetic narrator is internal with regard to both the story and the narration.

this requires two further gradations of the homodiegetic (internal) narrator. In one instance the homodiegetic narrator is the hero of its narrative, in the second it is a minor character, generally just an observer or witness (Genette, 245). These types of narrators can be related to both the narrative level and the story level and Genette developed a chart to illustrate those relationships.

LEVEL→ RELATIONSHIP ↘	Extradiegetic (Observer)	Intradiegetic (Hero)
Heterodiegetic (External)	Homer (Biblical narrator*)	Scheherezade
Homodiegetic (Character-bound)	Gil Blas	Ulysses

(Genette 248). Rimmon-Kenan says that "the narrative level to which the narrator belongs, the extent of his participation in the story, the degree of perceptibility of his role, and finally his reliability are crucial factors in the reader's understanding of and attitude to the story" (Rimmon-Kenan 94). It is to perceptibility that I turn next.

Perceptibility of the Narrating Agent

The relative presence or absence of the narrator is assessed by degrees, as Genette said earlier. "In covert narration we hear a voice speaking of

events, characters and setting, but its owner remains hidden in the discursive shadows" (Chatman 197). Even the most covert narrator cannot help but have some presence identifiable to the reader. Rimmon-Kenan defines six degrees of perception which range from maximally covert to maximally overt.

The least overt sign of narratorial presence is a *description of the setting*. Some idea of setting is needed by the reader and this is usually provided by the narrator. According to Rimmon-Kenan, "in a play or a film, all this would be shown directly. In narrative fiction, it has to be said in language, and the language is that of the narrator" (Rimmon-Kenan 97). She neglects the fact that the narrator can place such description in the mouths or minds of characters but I will not deal with this point now.

The next move towards overtness is the *identification of characters*. This allows the narrator to give information to the narratee/reader that it does not have, and even to describe characters at the outset of a narrative. Prior knowledge by the narrator is thus established (Rimmon-Kenan 97).

The third point Rimmon-Kenan discusses is *temporal summary*, a point also addressed by Chatman, "summary presupposes a desire to account for time passage, to satisfy questions in a narratee's mind about what has happened in the interval" (Chatman 223).

In the ascending order of overtness, the next step is the *definition of character*.

Whereas an identification of a character implies only the narrator's prior knowledge about or acquaintance with him, definition also suggests an abstraction, generalizing or summing up on the part of the narrator as well as a desire to present such labelling as authoritative characterization (Rimmon-Kenan 98).

Rimmon-Kenan qualifies this by saying that definition tends to be more reliable when provided by an external narrator (Rimmon-Kenan 98).

The fifth degree is the narrator's ability to report what a character has *not* said. This can include information that a character is unaware of or wishes to hide. "The mention of possible but unconsummated events calls attention more clearly still" (Chatman 225) to the presence of the narrator.

"Shifting to the overt narrator, we consider a spectrum of features, ranging from least to most obtrusive markers: from set descriptions and reports of what characters did not say or think, to the various kinds of commentary - interpretation, judgement and generalization" (Chatman 197). *Commentary* is Rimmon-Kenan's most overt sign of the narrator. When a narrator engages in interpretation it not only provides information about characters but also about itself and its biases. Judgement reveals the narrator's moral stance (Rimmon-Kenan 99). The third type of commentary is

generalization. "Critics have long noted the frequent citation in fictions of "general truths" that is, philosophical observations that reach beyond the world of the fictional work into the real universe" (Chatman 243).

Commentary very clearly establishes the narrator's presence no matter what type it may be.

Having assessed different types of narrators and the reader's ability to perceive them, it is important to determine whether or not a particular narrator is trustworthy.

Reliability

Rimmon-Kenan defines a reliable narrator as "one whose rendering of the story and commentary on it the reader is supposed to take as an authoritative account of the fictional truth" (Rimmon-Kenan 100). An unreliable narrator's information is questioned by the narratee/reader because it doesn't mesh with his/her own perceptions of the events. The unreliable narrator may be defined by its lack of knowledge, its own involvement in the story, or a discordant set of values (Rimmon-Kenan 100). Chatman says,

in "unreliable narration" the narrator's account is at odds with the implied reader's surmises about the story's real intentions. The story undermines the discourse. We conclude, by "reading out," between the lines, that the events and existents could not have been "like that," and so we hold the narrator suspect (Chatman 233).

I previously discussed the unreliability of character's self-descriptions. The views of an internal entity are generally questionable and this includes the overt homo-intradiegetic narrator. The covert hetero-extradiegetic narrator is most probably reliable (Rimmon-Kenan 103) but as it becomes more overt, reliability wanes. When the narrator's and the narrative's norms match, that is when the narrator is in compliance with the implied author, and when the narratee/reader accepts the narrator's words, it is reliable. I believe that an examination of the biblical text will show the reliability of the biblical narrator, and therefore I will not employ these terms of reference.

In conclusion, I will concentrate on what the narrator alone says when studying the biblical text. I will try to show that the biblical narrator is hetero-extradiegetic, tends to be minimally overt, and is therefore a reliable source of information when examining the characters within the Abrahamic saga. However, only a careful reading of the text will determine just what kind of narrator the biblical narrator really is.

TIME

Another important aspect of narrative is time. It is obvious that time must pass in a story, for it cannot all occur in a single instant. It also cannot

pass as it does in life. If it did a reader would never be able to finish a novel covering the lifetime of a character. "The peculiarity of the verbal narrative is that in it time is constitutive both of the means of representation (language) and of the object represented (the incidents of the story)" (Rimmon-Kenan 44).

Rimmon-Kenan distinguishes text-time from story-time. As the text consists of words placed one after another that build sentences that proceed one another, it is a linear creation. Text-time is also linear. It deals with "(spatial) dispositions of linguistic segments in the continuum of the text" (Rimmon-Kenan 44; also Bal 69). It is unidirectional and irreversible. Story-time is more flexible. It consists of a linear succession of events, but the events may not appear in chronological order.

Narrative pace can be effected in several ways ranging from maximum speed to full stop. The maximum acceleration is called *ellipsis*; its minimum counterpart is the *descriptive pause* (Rimmon-Kenan 53). In ellipsis there is little or no textual time allocated to time passage in the story (Bal 70). Elliptical time may or may not be explicitly mentioned, and there can be definite or indefinite ellipses (Genette 106). For example, ten years may pass between one paragraph and the next but not be explained. Mieke Bal says

that true ellipsis is imperceptible. "After all, nothing is indicated in the story about the amount of fabula-time involved. If nothing is indicated, we cannot know what should have been indicated either" (Bal 71).

Descriptive pause interrupts the story with a portion of text so that there is no progression of the story. Traditionally this property has been described as

a typically extemporal descriptive canon . . . , a canon where the narrator, forsaking the course of the story . . . , makes it his business, in his own name and solely for the information of his reader, to describe a scene that at this point in the story no one, strictly speaking, is looking at (Genette 100).

Between ellipsis and the descriptive pause there is a whole range of paces, two of which are *summary* and *scene*.

Genette describes summary as the connective tissue between scenes (Genette 97). He defines it as "a form with variable tempo . . . , which with great flexibility of pace covers the entire range included between scene and ellipsis" (Genette 94). Traditionally summary has been considered the relaying of many days, weeks, or years in a very compact textual segment, but with some description.

In scene story-time slows down, and comes closest to text-time (Bal 74). The nearest the two come to convergence is during segments of dialogue

(Rimmon-Kenan 54; Bal 71). In other types of scenes action or dialogue may be secondary to "psychological and social characterization" (Genette 111). Rimmon-Kenan says that what "characterizes scene is the quantity of narrative information and the relative effacement of the narrator" (Rimmon-Kenan 54).

Frequency is a simple concept. It is concerned with how often an event happens and how often that same event is narrated. Frequency often deals with repetition but this is not always so. Rimmon-Kenan, following Genette, identifies three attributes of frequency: the singulative, the iterative, and the repetitive (Rimmon-Kenan 57).

The singulative reports a narrative event that happened only once (Genette 114; Rimmon-Kenan 57). Singulative can also include "narrating n times what happened n times" (Genette 114). In other words, every time a character brushes its teeth, it is reported in the story. In the singulative the number of occurrences of an event is equal to the number of times it is reported. Genette says that the "type of narrative, where a single narrative utterance takes upon itself several occurrences together of the same event . . . we will call iterative . . ." (Genette 116). Simply put, the iterative states only once an event that was habitual or recurring. Bal calls this "reverse

repetition" (Bal 78).

Repetition encompasses both the iterative and the singulative according to Genette. He defines repetition as "a mental construction, which eliminates from each occurrence everything belonging to it that is peculiar to itself, in order to preserve only what it shares with all others of the same class . . . "

(Genette 113). For Rimmon-Kenan repetition is a little different from singulative or iterative. Repetition is the repeated telling of an event that happened just once (Rimmon-Kenan 57). Thus a character that was hit by a car tells his tale to the police, the doctor, his family and friends, at various points in the story. Despite this repetition, each retelling is slightly different. Two events are never exactly the same, and the retelling of the same event is never the same (Bal 77).

GAPS

A final aspect of narrative that I will address, before applying what is appropriate to Genesis 12-23, 25:1-18, is *gap*. Plainly stated, gaps are blanks in the narrative, omitted information that may or may not be vital. This is only determined at the end (Rimmon-Kenan 128). Gaps can be closely related to time factors. A temporary gap results from a discrepancy between

text-time and story-time. This type of gap may be used to create suspense (Rimmon-Kenan 128).

Permanent gaps may occur in both story and text. A gap in the story necessitates an omission in the text, but a hole in the text may not mean a gap in the story (Rimmon-Kenan 129). Gaps may be included on purpose to fulfil a narrative need such as the creation of suspense. They may omit information that was not relevant or they may highlight necessary information that the narratee-reader must look for. Rimmon-Kenan says that "whatever category the gap belongs to, it always enhances interest and curiosity, prolongs the reading process, and contributes to the reader's dynamic participation in making the text signify" (Rimmon-Kenan 129).

I plan to examine Genesis 12-23, 25:1-18 to see if there are any temporary or permanent gaps that may affect how we understand the characters who inhabit that narrative world. I will now turn to a direct examination of the characters in the Abrahamic saga.

CHAPTER TWO

REFLECTIONS OF יְהוָה IN GENESIS 12-17

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I will deal with the material in Genesis 12-17. This covers God's call to Abraham in Genesis 12 to the establishment of circumcision as the sign of the covenant in Genesis 17. Within this unit we see Abram's original call, the development of his relationship with God, and the explication and sign of the promise made in Genesis 12, and reiterated throughout.

As we have seen in the preceding chapter, there are several factors that are commonly believed to reveal character in novels. Some of these are fairly simple such as examining how a character is described in the work, either by him/herself or by other characters. Another way is to look for physical description of the character under scrutiny. You can also examine the characters' actions and spoken words. However, all these theories have been developed from an examination of fictional literature.

This can be a problem when discussing literature that may be considered biographical, such as in the case of the Bible. Many Jews, Christians, and Muslims consider the contents of the Bible to be true

historical accounts of actual historical persons, places, and events. As stated in my Introduction, I plan to examine the biblical text as literature and not in its role as sacred scripture. Therefore, I will treat it as I would treat Shakespeare's plays, applying the same techniques that are used in any literary study.

The first topic I will address in this chapter is the biblical narrator.

THE BIBLICAL NARRATOR

This may seem a strange place to start. However, since we have no definitive access to the real or implied author(s) of the Bible, we must rely on the narrator for our information. If we are to trust this entity we must first determine whether or not it is reliable within the story it is telling. If it is not, all the information provided by the narrator must be considered suspect.

In the previous chapter it was stated that the most reliable narrator was, in Genette's definition, the extra-heterodiegetic narrator. That is, the narrator who tells its tale from beyond the confines of the story with no (or at least minimal) personal interference, would be the most trustworthy. Is the biblical narrator extra-heterodiegetic, that is external to both the story it relates and the narrative text?

The biblical narrator never refers to itself as a character within the story it is reporting (with the exception of some of the prophetic texts). Meir Sternberg says that such inclusions as Nehemiah's self-introduction are so rare that they "prove the rule of narration, by which self-reflexive language is conspicuous for its absence. No self-naming, no reference to a speaking "I", no exact clues to the time and place of communication" (Sternberg 66). "Here is Nehemiah. I was there, and therefore I am competent to tell" and "Here is the voice of narrative authority. I am everywhere, transcendent, and therefore speak with authority" (Sternberg 73). The narrator relays its information from a non-characterized position, and may be called external according to Bal's distinctions. There is not one verse in Genesis 12:1-23:20, 25:1-18 in which the narrator either directly or indirectly refers to itself as being a character in the story. The fact that the biblical narrator in Genesis 12:1-23:20, 25:1-18 does not refer to itself, may be one step towards accepting its reliability.

As discussed earlier, narrators can range in perceptibility from maximally overt to maximally covert, or anything in between. What I will now do is turn to the biblical text to assess the perceptibility of the narrator.

The narrator of Genesis 12-17 is sometimes minimally overt, such as in

the following verses, in which the narrator simply introduces the speaker of the words reported:

Genesis 15:8 *And he said*, "Oh Lord God, how shall I know that I am to possess it?" (JPS)

Genesis 16:8 . . . *And she said*, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai." (JPS)

Genesis 17:19 *God said*, "Nevertheless Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac; and I will maintain My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring to come." (JPS)

These are just a sample of minimal overtness. In other verses, while still introducing the speaker, however, the biblical narrator also adds information, such as indicating who is speaking to whom:

Genesis 12:1 *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." (RSV)

Genesis 13:8 *Abram said to Lot*, "Let there be no strife between you and me, between my herdsmen and yours, for we are kinsmen." (JPS)

This second type of example is in the majority in Genesis 12:1-23:20, 25:1-18 but narratorial presence is still relatively minimal. There is no indication that any of the information provided in these examples ought to be suspect.

Another example of the varying degrees of narratorial presence throughout the books of Genesis 12-25 occurs in Genesis 13:14, "*And the Lord said to Abram, after Lot had parted from him, 'Raise your eyes and*

look out from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and to the west' (JPS)." The narrator not only tells us that God addresses Abram, but also when, "after Lot had left." Since this information is included, should it be considered important? God commands Abram to leave Haran (Genesis 12:1-3), and He speaks once again when he reaches Canaan, promising the land to Abram's offspring (Genesis 12:7.) This is the last time God speaks to Abram until after Lot's departure. Why might this be significant?

It may not mean anything, but God's silence may indicate disapproval of Lot's presence in Abram's entourage. In Genesis 12:1-3 God commanded Abram to leave his father's house and his kin. In ancient Israel 'house' or **בית**, did not merely refer to the physical building, but also to the family dynasty. Abram was thus told twice to abandon his family for a new life. However, he does not do this. He brings along his brother's son, Lot. This is contrary to the command of God, yet He in no way overtly reprimands Abram. He just does not communicate with Abram much until Lot departs. After Lot's departure there are numerous instances of communication between God and Abram. I will return to this at a later time.

There are two final examples of presence that I wish to discuss before moving on. They concern Genesis 14:1-17 and Genesis 25. The material in

these two passages is relayed completely by the narrator, without any character intervention. In the first passage the narrator tells of the wars between several of the kings of the area. It relates their alliances and rebellions, and the effect they have on the area around Sodom and Gomorrah. Included in this section is the capture of Lot and Abram's rescue of him and the other captives. Important here also is Abram's encounter with Melchizedek. Though not one of Abram's company, Melchizedek is also a follower of God Most High. They worship the same God. All this information is provided by the narrator, until the meeting between Abram and Melchizedek, Genesis 14:18. At that point the two men converse. The narrator speeds along story time until we arrive at what is truly important - the meeting of two men of God Most High. Everything up to now was preparation for this encounter.

Genesis 25 is told completely by the narrator from beginning to end. There are no characters directly present at all. It is a summary of Abraham's life after Sarah's death. The narrator tells of his remarriage; the birth of other children; Abraham's age; his death and burial. There is no conversation between Abraham and his new wife, Keturah. There is no information about the children except their names and their descendants. The narrator does tell

us how Abraham's wealth was distributed before and after his death, with almost everything going to Isaac. It also tells that Abraham's burial was attended by both Isaac and Ishmael, and that he was buried with Sarah in the cave of Machpelah.

Within these two passages there are indications of the narrator's feelings or opinions, and additional knowledge. In Genesis 14:1-3, we are told the names of all the warring kings and where they fought, in the Valley of the Siddim. In addition to the name of the valley, we learn that this was its former name and that it is now known as the Dead Sea. There is a similar example in verse 7 when it is reported that the name of En-mishpat is now Kadesh. The inclusion of this information tells us that the narrator is reporting from a later point in history when the names of the area have altered somewhat. In Adele Berlin's terms the narrator is both spatially and temporally distant (Berlin 59) from the events it is reporting. This is a further indication of its external status.

The material in Genesis 25 will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. However, I would like to comment on some of the information provided by the narrator. Verse 8 seems to indicate the narrator's opinion, "And Abraham breathed his last, *dying at a good ripe age, old and contented*; and

he was gathered to his kin." There is a great deal in this line. The narrator tells us that it believes Abraham to have been happy at the time of his death, and that 175 years was a good lifespan. We are also told that Abraham was buried in the cave of Machpelah (v.9) and that he was gathered to his kin. There were no other kin in the cave for him to return to, just Sarah (who as we shall see, may have been his half-sister).

What I wish to demonstrate here is that the narrator has privileged information. It is given knowledge of Abraham's inner feelings (contentment) as well as information about the descendants of several of his children. The ability to provide this information again stresses the distance of the narrator from the story it is telling. If it can tell the generations of the sons, it must have access to historical data and cannot be temporally close to the events. However, what these incursions may indicate is that the narrator deliberately places itself within the narrative to distance itself and the narratee-reader from the story.

The biblical narrator varies in covertness. It is predominantly on the second rung of Rimmon-Kenan's ladder of overtness, being restricted to identifying characters before they speak. However, the biblical narrator also provides temporal summary as in Genesis 14 and 25. Our narrator does not

tend to define the biblical cast but it does, on occasion, tell us what one of the cast is thinking or feeling. Since our biblical narrator occurs in all these incarnations, it cannot be considered an extra-heterodiegetic narrator in Genette's terms.

Sternberg describes the biblical narrator in the following way

the story-teller appears only as a disembodied voice, nameless and faceless. . . . he avoids all reference to the act of storytelling - to himself as maker, recorder, editor, or even narrator - nor does he betray the least consciousness of facing an audience by way of direct address and the like. . . . he exercises all the privileges of omniscience, in sharp (because qualitative) opposition to both his *dramatis personae* and his own everyday self (Sternberg 71).

In the preceding examples, I believe that we have seen confirmation of Sternberg's assessment of the narrator. The narrator does *not* have a name or any known physicality. It does not refer to itself and it does have privileged information.

If reliability is dependent on the narratee-reader's acceptance of the narrator's version of events, then I think it is safe to say that the biblical narrator is reliable. There do not appear to be any instances within the text where the narrator seems at odds with the story. There do not appear to be any instances of lack of information on behalf of the narrator that the characters possess. Sternberg supports this, saying "just as the narrator is not

the victim of irony on the author's part, so does he not indiscriminately traffic in irony at the reader's expense: his ironies, many and diverse, are situational rather than verbal!" (Sternberg 51). The narrator is not a character within the story, and its ideology seems congruent with the ideology of the narrative. For these reasons, I will assume that the biblical narrator is reliable.

I would like to conclude this section with another quote from Sternberg. "The narrator stands to the world of his tale as God to the world represented in that tale, each reigning supreme in his own sphere of activity" (Sternberg 83). Having established, with some certainty, that the biblical narrator can be trusted, I will now turn to an examination of the characters themselves beginning with a look at all the physical descriptions given of the predominant characters in Genesis 12:1-17:27.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

By physical description I mean any reference to how some character looks or what (s)he wears, any thing that applies to outward appearance. In narrative fiction these types of descriptions often help us identify certain characteristics of a character. When you read a passage describing a jolly man with a long white beard in a bright red suit, carrying a sack of toys, your

first inclination is to think of Santa Claus. Such readily identifiable outward signs bring with them a lot of other implicit information.

This type of information is not readily available in Genesis 12-17. There is very little physical description of people in the biblical text. Bar-Efrat says, "there is no precise, detailed description of the physical appearance of characters in biblical narrative" (Bar-Efrat 48). According to Berlin "it is not physical description that is lacking, *but physical description of human beings*" (Berlin 34). A careful reading of these biblical chapters does reveal very little in the way of physical depiction of the human cast. Even the physical description actually provided may not contribute any information towards characterization of the person described. Bar-Efrat states that in the Bible there "is no connection between appearance and nature" (Bar-Efrat 48). However, on the rare occasions when some physical aspect is mentioned, it should be regarded as important. Not necessarily for characterization but possibly for upcoming events.

Within Genesis 12-17 there are a few brief passages with descriptive information. They are Genesis 12:4, 11, and 14, Genesis 16:12, and Genesis 17:1, 17, and 23-27. There are no physical depictions in Genesis 13, 14 or 15.

In Genesis 12:4 we are informed by the narrator that Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. But what are we to glean from this tidbit of information? The meaning of this is illuminated by several following verses. In Genesis 12:1-3 God commanded Abram to leave behind his home and family for a new land. He was promised, among other things, that he would become a great nation. Verse four tells us that he left, with Lot, at age 75. Verse five tells us that he also took his wife and all his worldly goods. Genesis 12:7 states that the Lord addressed Abram, promising the new land to his offspring.

By reexamining v 4-5 in light of this, we glean that Abram does not have any offspring. He left Haran, at age 75, with his wife and nephew. No other family accompanies him on his journey. Since he is 75 it seems questionable that he should beget children now. Most of Abram's ancestors begat their first child by the time they were thirty-five. Only Terah and Abraham are older men before they have children (Sacks 76). This is supported by the genealogy in Genesis 11:10-32. Yet God promises the land, not to a relative or chosen heir, but to his *offspring*.

"When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, "I know that you are a woman beautiful to behold" (Genesis 12:11 RSV)." Abram

comments on the appearance of his wife, saying she is beautiful, but he goes into no further detail. Genesis 12:14 confirms Abram's opinion of Sarai's looks. "When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful" (Genesis 12:14 RSV). If Abram alone had described Sarai as a beautiful woman, the information may have been questionable. However, since the Pharaoh's courtiers would have been unbiased we may accept the veracity of the description. Accepting it as true does not explain the significance of this inclusion.

There are few references to beauty in the Bible but they all seem ambiguous about its value. Rachel (Genesis 29:17), Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:2), and Tamar (2 Samuel 13:1) are all said to be beautiful women. Their beauty is mentioned because it influences what happens to them and those around them. Because of Rachel's beauty Jacob fell in love with her, but he was tricked into marrying her sister, Leah. David found Bathsheba beautiful, leading him to commit adultery and murder. David's daughter, Tamar, is considered beautiful by her half-brother, Amnon, who contrived to rape her before then rejecting her. Because of his actions, her brother Absalom was outraged and plotted revenge. Two years later Absalom was responsible for Amnon's death. What is the worth of beauty if it results in incidents such as

these?

Sarai's beauty also led to difficult circumstances. Abram, without any apparent cause, feared that the Egyptians would kill him if they knew that Sarai was his wife, and so he asked her to say she was his sister. Genesis 12:14-15 seems to confirm, to a degree, Abram's cautions about admitting their marital status. Pharaoh's courtiers saw her beauty and she was taken into Pharaoh's harem. As a result of this, Abram was given slaves and livestock to add to what he already had. But because of this, the Egyptians were afflicted with plagues, until Pharaoh returned Sarai to Abram and sent them away. Sarai's beauty was injurious to the Egyptians, but profitable for Abram. What it may have meant to Sarai herself we are not told.

The next possible reference to physical appearance occurs in Genesis 16:12. In this passage an angel of the Lord addressed the pregnant Hagar. The angel named the child and prophesied about his future. It was said that "he shall be a wild ass of a man, his hand against every man and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen" (Genesis 16:12 RSV). This passage is somewhat ambivalent as it does not clearly indicate if the angel is talking about Ishmael's future appearance or his mental and emotional makeup.

The references in Genesis 17 are all to the ages of the characters.

Genesis 17:1 tells us that the Lord appeared to Abram, reiterating the promise of offspring, when Abram was ninety-nine years old. Verses 1-14 establish the terms of the covenant between God and Abram, and he became Abraham. In v.15, God changed Sarai's name to Sarah and promised that she would bear a son. Verse 17 returns to the issue of age. "Abraham threw himself on his face and laughed, as he said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?" (JPS)." Through this we learn that twenty-five years have passed since God first recruited Abraham and that he and Sarah are still childless. Yet it is through Sarah's child that the promise is to be fulfilled.

After the extensive conversation between God and Abraham, Abraham fulfilled the outward sign of the covenant. He and all the males with him were circumcised. At that time Abraham was ninety-nine and Ishmael was thirteen.

Again in this chapter, Abraham's age is stressed, as is Sarah's. They are promised a child in their old age and Abraham undergoes the procedure of circumcision as a sign that he trusts in the Lord's promise.

We see from this discussion that the descriptions we have of Abraham

and Sarah do not tell us anything about their characters. The depiction of Sarah's beauty reveals more about Abraham than Sarah, who remains very opaque. Nevertheless, the repeated references to their ages tell us more about God and His power, than about Abraham, Sarah, and Ishmael. Not once within these chapters is there any hint give as to what יהוה looks like even though He is said to "appear" to Abraham. Thus, this common method of characterizing fictional personages is not very useful when applied to biblical characters, especially God. The information we have about God comes through His interactions with the other characters and through the names by which He is called. I will discuss the latter first.

BIBLICAL EPITHETS

Within any story one of the first and most important character indicators readers identify is the proper name. As discussed earlier names help to individualize characters and provide a place for the reader to put traits found in the course of reading. Aside from proper names characters can also be labelled as hero, villain, father, wife, or king (Berlin 59; Bar Efrat 9; see also Chapter 1). They may also be described as barren or beautiful. This is also true in the case of the Bible.

Meir Sternberg discusses in detail the importance of names in the Bible in "Proleptic Epithet" (Sternberg 328). In "prolepsis the reader is confronted with the future event before its time" (Rimmon-Kenan 48). An epithet is "a descriptive word or phrase substituted for the person's name". Sternberg's proleptic epithet is a descriptive word or phrase that often defines the character before the occurrence of the event that would support or verify that epithet. However, for Sternberg names are also epithetic. The biblical name reveals something about the character to whom it belongs.

According to Sternberg the Bible supplies unique names (Sternberg 329) when it names. Anonymity does exist in the form of such figures as wise women, messengers, and collective figures (Sternberg 330). Without names characters remain lifeless, stock-type figures. The move from nameless to entitlement indicates increased importance within the biblical sphere. In the Abraham saga, Abram is repeatedly promised an heir. A nameless heir until יִצְחָק provides him with one in Genesis 17. The child is to be called Isaac, but at this point in the narrative he has not yet been conceived.

For Sternberg biblical names can indicate "the bearer's role or status or destiny or prenatal antecedents rather than his secret self" (Sternberg 330).

For Bal biblical names "help to integrate the character into its life" (Bal 73). They are, I believe, in agreement. Both seem to be saying that the character comes to fit its name. The name in some way determines what the character does or becomes. The example Bal gives is Orpah from **Ruth**. Her name means "back" or "neck" in the Moabite language and she becomes the one who turns her back on Naomi (Bal 73). Her destiny was predetermined, or at least foreshadowed, by her name. Even proleptic epithets do not reveal everything there is to know about biblical personages. The name is an *initial* identifier, with *possible* proleptic qualities. Although the name may define a character's destiny, it does not define the road taken to reach that destiny.

Sternberg's epithets have two functions, "one bearing directly on the character it qualifies, and the other bearing on the plot where he figures" (Sternberg 337). As with Isaac, a character may be introduced long before (s)he appears in the text. The proleptic epithet thus serves to influence the information between the initial introduction and the arrival of the character. The epithet "shapes the sequence of our expectations (as a foreshadowing device) because it is bound to shape the sequence of events (as a developmental factor) (Sternberg 338). We come to have expectations of the character based upon the epithets provided in the story. Abram is called the

father of a nation long before he is an earthly father but there is the constant expectation of offspring.

Biblical epithets may take one of many forms, not just the proper name. They may be epithets of deliverance, exposition, morals, or neutral identifiers. For instance, deliverance epithets often relate to physical traits (Sternberg 338). A character may also be addressed by titles rather than a proper name (Berlin 59). Physical description may also fill the role of epithet. Of interest to the Abraham saga, "a woman described as good-looking will sooner or later become the object of love or lust" (Sternberg 339). In addition, "the portrayal of a woman as barren promises that her sterility will not only come to a crisis but to an end" (Sternberg 339). Since both descriptions apply to Sarai we will return to them when we examine her role in Genesis 12-17.

Biblical characters are never simply designated as hero or villain. If a named character is portrayed as such, the reader determines this from the textual cues. If a character seems villainous (s)he is never just a villain. The narrator never specifically says that Ahab is a monster, but it is implied throughout the story that this is so. There is always more to the character than this single trait. Abraham is not the hero because of his faith alone. There is more to him that makes him the kind of leader God desired. These

traits are supplied by the narrator then gathered and made coherent by the narratee-reader.

Having a brief overview of the use of names in the Bible I will now examine the names and epithets provided in Genesis 12-17.

Genesis 12

Genesis 12 begins, ("The Lord said to Abram . . ."). The narratee-reader is immediately introduced to the names of the two main protagonists of the Abrahamic saga. It is the interaction between יהוה and Abram that is of central importance. For each principle character there is more than one epithet by which (s)he is known. By examining what each of the named personages is called, especially יהוה and Abram, the narratee-reader should be able to begin filling in the process of characterization.

There are a total of five individuals named and two groups identified in Genesis 12. יהוה, Abram, Lot, Sarai, and Pharaoh are all individualised to some extent. Pharaoh is also linked to the two groups: the Egyptians and Pharaoh's courtiers. The epithetic references to the Egyptians, courtiers, and Pharaoh, are not very illuminating so I shall not say any more about them.

It is Lot and Sarai who receive multiple epithets in Genesis 12. Lot is not only named but he is also identified as בן־אחיו ("the son of his brother")

in Genesis 12:5. This presents Lot as an individual in an extended family.

He is Lot the man, but he is also Lot the son, and Lot the nephew. He is not alone but part of a larger whole.

Sarai has the greatest variety of names. In Genesis 12:5 we are told her name and relationship to Abram, אשתו, his woman or wife. Genesis 12:11 repeats these epithets and also states that she is a *beautiful woman*. In 12:12 we are again told that Sarai is Abram's wife and in 12:13 that he wishes her to be known as his sister. The courtiers reiterate that she is beautiful,

אתהאשה כייפה הוא מאד.

Throughout the chapter Sarai is properly named only three times, in Genesis 12:5, 11, and 17. She is predominantly referred to as "Abram's wife". This defines her relationship to Abram and her social position.

By varying the referents to Lot and Sarai, the narrator defines their roles in relation to the main characters, יהוה and Abram. Each is presented in familial relation to Abram, one as nephew and the other as wife. The words referring to יהוה and Abram are simply their names, יהוה and אברם. There are no other phrases substituted for the name of either character. If this is the case, what does it mean?

In Genesis 12:1-3 Abram is sent to a new land and promised

nationhood by יהוה. He is implicitly a brother and uncle, as well as a husband, although he is never directly described as such. However, he is not even implicitly a father. The only two family members mentioned by the narrator are Lot and Sarai. The rest of Abram's entourage would seem to consist of servants and slaves. No children, no offspring. יהוה has not yet made Abram the promise of offspring, but He has promised nationhood which implies the need for successors.

The Hebrew term יהוה which is pronounced "adonai"⁷ and for which the English word "Lord" is substituted, is the single word used for the Deity in Genesis 12. He is simply יהוה. He has no family connections. There is no indication that He has parents and this may lead to certain interpolations. Without parents there can be no beginning determined for יהוה. Without a beginning, the possibility of an ending may also be questioned. With one name which cannot be pronounced, no family, and no origins, this character is marked as unique.

The fact that Abram also has only one name also identifies him as special. All the family connections go *toward* Abram *from* the other

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This term is not pronounced in Judaism out of respect for the Divine Name. It is instead pronounced as "adonai" when required to be spoken aloud.

characters. Abram is never called "uncle" or "husband" but these relationships are implicit in the epithets applied to Lot and Sarai. Why would the narrator make the family ties explicit from Sarai and Lot but implicit from Abram to them? Perhaps this further emphasises his uniqueness as well as his relationship to יהוה.

Abram is the only person to whom יהוה communicates directly in Genesis 12. Abram is the only one called by יהוה to leave his family and go to a strange land. He is unique because of his position which in some ways isolates him from the rest of humanity. However, he is also implicitly tied to humanity through his family. In these ways, through his uniqueness and his humanity, he acts as a bridge between יהוה and His creation.

Genesis 13

In Genesis 13, יהוה is the only character to remain singularly named. Abram himself defines his humanity and family ties. In a conversation with Lot he refers to them both as men and brothers, as well as general kinsmen. Sarai is once again called his wife, but he is still not her husband. Why would the narrator now connect Abram directly to Lot after carefully avoiding doing so in Genesis 12? It is possible that having previously emphasised Abram's uniqueness and his closeness to יהוה, he must now be shown as

explicitly human. Abram is not isolated as יהוה is. He *does* have family and he *is* a man. These explicit references once again establish Abram as a link between יהוה and man.

Genesis 14

There are a great many individuals and groups listed in Genesis 14.

There is a list of two groups of warring kings of the area, as well as a list of the nations conquered by the successful combatants (Genesis 14:1-7). The narrator tell us that a conjunction of four kings defeats a union of five, but why is any of this information included? It seems to have nothing to do with the characterization of יהוה.

The kings and their exploits are mentioned because they help illuminate Abram's character and thus indirectly, the character of יהוה. During the raids the four successful kings take Lot captive (Genesis 14:12). When Abram learns of Lot's plight he gathers together 318 men and pursues the band. By night, Abram and his men attack the four prosperous allies and free Lot and the other captives.

This incident tells us several things about Abram. First, we can surmise that Abram felt very strongly about the need to protect family. He went against four strong monarchs with a small band to save his brother's son.

Second, he quickly mounts a pursuit force to save his nephew. Third, with only 318 men he was victorious against four sovereigns and their armies. By this we can tell that Abraham was a good military leader who could rapidly form a victorious expedition. These points show that Abram was an able leader. This is one of many incidents that show that יהוה seems to have made a wise choice.

This is not the only important scene in this chapter. After returning from his victorious rescue mission, Abram meets with the kings of Sodom and Salem. The king of Salem, Melchizedek, greets Abram in an interesting manner. He says, "Blessed be Abram of *God Most High*," אֱלֹהֵי עֵלִי. Melchizedek recognizes Abram's specialness and his God. They both worship the same Deity. Yet it is Abram, a nomadic shepherd, who has been chosen to build a nation.

The king of Sodom has been silent up to now. When he does speak he offers Abram a deal for the return of the plunder. He wishes to take back the people and for Abram to take the material goods. Abram refuses swearing an oath by אֱלֹהֵי עֵלִי that he wants nothing but the provisions his people used on the return journey (Genesis 14:22-24). No man is going to be able to say he had anything to do with Abram's prosperity or greatness.

This is the first instance in the Abrahamic saga where יהוה is called something different. Melchizedek has named Him אל עליון, God Most High, as well as Creator of Heaven and Earth (Genesis 14:19). Abram also uses these terms when he swears his oath in Genesis 14:22. Melchizedek is not part of the chosen people yet he pays homage to the same God as Abram. Here He is not just יהוה but אל עליון, the highest God, the supreme God. Melchizedek recognizes Him as such, but not explicitly as the only God. At this point there is no indication that Abram believes Him to be the only God, but throughout the story he never worships or calls upon anyone but יהוה. This may be the reason Abram was called - his willingness to accept just one God where Melchizedek may have believed Him to be one of many. Abram's oath does not necessarily imply that he endorses this multiplicity. He is reaffirming that יהוה is indeed the Highest God.

The reference to "Creator of Heaven and Earth" is interesting. It will remind the reader of the opening line of Genesis

בראשית ברא אלהים את השמים ואת הארץ

("In the beginning (of) God Created the heavens and the earth"). However the terms used by Melchizedek are different. He says,

ויברכהו ויאמר ברוך אברהם אל עליון קנה שמים וארץ

("And he blessed him and he said "Blessed is Abram of God Most High, the One creating the heavens and the earth"). The difference is that between the form of one active verb (ברא) and the active participle of another verb (קנה), but the meaning is the same. The God of Abram and Melchizedek created the world as they knew it and they paid tribute to Him as the supreme God.

Despite the expansion of epithets for יהוה His character has not really changed in any major way. His power is affirmed and expanded. Now He not only has the power to move a man from his family with the promise of nationhood, but He is also described as the creator of the world. His supremacy is defined in the term אל עליון, God Most High. There are none above Him.

Genesis 15

There are only two characters of import in Genesis 15. Indeed, aside from יהוה and Abram there is only a list of names of the people who will be subject to Abram's descendants. The names of יהוה and Abram vary little in this episode.

In Genesis 15 Abram is never called by anything but his name. He is Abram from the beginning to the end. He is not an uncle or a husband but a

man who is on his own at this moment in story-time. He does not even have an heir as he tells us in Genesis 15:2. This is the first time he explicitly mentions his childlessness.

יהוה has two proper names and a descriptive epithet in this section. He is called both יהוה (Genesis 15:1, 4, 6, 7, 18) and אדני יהוה (Genesis 15:2,8) in addition to calling Himself a "shield". Both יהוה and אדני יהוה serve to reaffirm His status as God. The use of the epithet "shield" (מגן) is more characterizing than either of His proper names. A shield is used for protection and in Genesis 15:1 יהוה says that He is Abram's protection, his shield. Not only can יהוה inflict plague (Genesis 12:17), promise great things (Genesis 13:15-17) and take a man from his family (Genesis 12:1), but He will also protect Abram from the dangers he faces during his commission. The epithets for יהוה may be increasing but He is still an influential being. This does not change.

Genesis 16

The cast of characters explodes in Genesis 16. We are presented with Sarai, Hagar, Abram, יהוה, an angel of יהוה, and Ishmael. In addition to the long list of proper names there are other epithets for several of the characters.

Genesis 16 is the first chapter in the saga to begin focused on a female.

Sarai is initially focused on here, as well as in Genesis 21 and 23. In 16:1 we are told that "Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children". First we are given her name, establishing her as a person in her own right. Then we are again reminded of her relationship to Abram. She is his wife. Third and most important, we learn that she has had no children. She is woman and wife but not mother.

Sarai is also called "mistress" several times (Genesis 16:4, 8, 9). This shows us that she has power over people's lives, specifically that of Hagar, her Egyptian maidservant. Because of her childlessness, she "gives" Hagar to Abram. Without any consultation Hagar is turned into a brood mare for a man to whom she is not married and who does not love her.

This may be viewed as a cold-hearted move or an act of desperation. Hagar the Egyptian maid has no control over her own fate. Sarai is in control. This fact is both affirmed and alleviated by the angel. This emissary tells her to submit to Sarai, and also what the fate of her son will be. The angel also names that son Ishmael, "God heeds".

Abram's family ties are once again in the forefront in Genesis 16. He is still Sarai's husband but he is now also the father of Ishmael (16:4, 11). He now has an heir, the offspring who will potentially inherit the promise.

There are three aspects about יהוה that should be considered. He is again יהוה. He is also called אל ראי by Hagar (God appearing/appearance). This has to be examined carefully. Genesis 16:13 says this is what she called "the Lord who spoke to her". The being who spoke to her directly was called an "angel of the Lord" (Genesis 16:7, 9, 10, 11) yet in v.13 she called יהוה (not His angel) *who spoke to her* אל ראי. Why would she confuse the two? The "angel of the Lord" and the "word of the Lord" can be considered as aspects of יהוה, representations of Him and His power. The angel of יהוה has the power to command Hagar as יהוה commanded Abram. The angel also has the power to make promises and to name. Since the angel has the abilities of יהוה it is in some way an extension of יהוה so when Hagar calls יהוה who spoke to her אל ראי, she can be said to speak of both יהוה and His messenger.

This chapter further elucidates the character of יהוה. יהוה through His emissary, the angel, shows us several things. First, He is merciful to people in trouble, making Hagar a promise similar to the one He made Abram. Obedience is also important to Him and He sends Hagar back to Sarai's harsh treatment. However, since Hagar is made a great promise, she must prove that she is worthy of it, as will Abram, and perhaps her test is her

ability to accept Sarai's treatment. We also learn that the messenger of יהוה has the ability to foretell the sex of unborn children and bestow names.

Through יהוה this being receives its abilities and emphasizes His power. It is a circular set of events.

Genesis 17

Genesis 17 is very important for the examination of names because in this chapter almost all names change. יהוה discusses the promise with Abram for a fourth time and once again it changes slightly. Instead of Abram being the progenitor of a nation, he is to become the father of a multitude of nations. The change in his status seems to necessitate a change in his name. Henceforth he is to be known as Abraham.

יהוה also changes Sarai's name. שר is a word meaning "official" or "leader" and שרי may be considered a feminized form of this Hebrew noun. When Abram becomes Abraham, "the father of a multitude of nations", Sarai (שרי) becomes Sarah (שרה), a "noblewoman" or "princess". She is not just a leader amongst her people, she is the foremost female leader. Just as יהוה elevated Abram, He correspondingly raised his wife.

Ishmael is also mentioned in Genesis 17 but his name remains unchanged. This is quite probably due to the fact that it was already ordained

by יהוה through the angel before the child's birth. It already reflects his relationship to יהוה through its meaning, "God heeds".

יהוה steps in once more and names an unborn child (Genesis 17:19). In fact this child is not yet conceived. He tells Abraham that Sarah will bear a son and that they shall name him Isaac, יצחק. This name is a play on the word שחק meaning "to laugh" or "laughter". This refers back to v.17 where Abraham laughed when יהוה told him he and Sarah would have a child. And this is not the last time laughter will be associated with the child.

There is a major shift in how יהוה is named in Genesis 17. In 17:1, He is called יהוה by the narrator as well as calling Himself אל שדי. אל is another form of the word "God", roughly equivalent to יהוה and the singular form of the word אלהים. שדי may be translated as "most powerful" or "almighty". Thus in Genesis 17:1 יהוה is the Lord God Almighty. This may be taken as reliable because nowhere previously or after the appearance of this epithet, is the narratee-reader placed in a position to doubt its possible veracity.

Throughout the rest of the chapter He is called אלהים. This can be translated plurally as "gods" when referring to non-Israelite deities, but is always translated as "God" when referring to יהוה. יהוה is the Lord God

Most High, Creator of Heaven and Earth, and now He is also אלהים. The plurality of this term may be indicative of the Israelite belief that their God encompasses all the aspects of the non-Israelite deities within Himself. The God of Abraham is the only God needed because He is all things, all gods in one. He is more than any one deity and therefore it is appropriate to call Him אלהים.

From this examination of names and epithets the narratee-reader may deduce many things about the character of יהוה as presented in Genesis 12-17. The very first thing we learn from His name is that He is generally known as יהוה, Lord. A lord is someone with power and responsibilities. He is also known as God Most High. It is believed by Melchizedek and Abram that His powers exceed that of other deities. יהוה is named as the creator of heaven and earth. He has the power of creation, forming something where there was previously nothing (Genesis 14:19; Genesis 1:1-2). Not only do His epithets stand alone but they combine to reinforce the image of His power and position in Genesis 15:2, 8. Here He is known as אדני יהוה, often translated as "the Lord God" to avoid confusion. The powers of יהוה and the Angel of the Lord are conflated in 16:7 and this results in Hagar calling יהוה El-roi, אל ראי. This helps to establish Him as a God who sees His people and aids

them. Finally, in Genesis 17 He names Himself **אל שדי**, God Almighty. He is the mightiest God.

This multi-named God has the power to create worlds (Genesis 1:1-2, 14:19). **יהוה** has the ability to move a man from his family on the vague promise of being given an indeterminate new land (Genesis 12:1-4). He is a protector of His chosen people and those who call on Him (Genesis 15:1, 16:10-12). **יהוה** can also bestow and change names at will (Genesis 16:11, 17:5, 15). These names that He gives often reflect the pre-birth actions of the child's parents or the person's upcoming destiny. Ishmael was so-named because **יהוה** responded to Hagar's distress. Isaac's name is a pun based on the laughter of his father at the prediction of his birth. Abraham becomes the father of a multitude of nations, not just one. God's epithets for others alludes to the plans that He has for their future, and presumably His power to make those plans happen.

Through examining both His own epithets and those He bestows on others, we have learned a great deal about **יהוה**.

THOUGHT, WORD AND DEED

When discussing ways of presenting character in Chapter 1, I briefly

examined direct and indirect means of characterization. Direct definition occurs when a character's traits are explicitly stated by use of an adjective, noun, or part of speech (Rimmon-Kenan 59). Direct definition generally involves description of outward appearance, character traits, and mental states (Bar-Efrat 48, 53). "Indirect ways of shaping the characters are to found in all those external features, like speech or actions, which indicate something about the individual's inner state" (Bar-Efrat 64). Indirect presentation requires more interpretation on the part of the narratee-reader because the information provided is implicit.

There are biblical chapters which are composed almost entirely of speech (Genesis 17). Others contain only brief dialogues embedded in information relayed directly by the narrator (Genesis 14). There are also those chapters that have no dialogue whatsoever (Genesis 25).

Speech is defined in different ways. It can be presented as being spoken directly by the character. This is known as direct discourse and is usually marked by such conventions as "(s)he said", commas, and quotation marks. Free indirect discourse is direct discourse without the "(s)he said"-type cues (Rimmon-Kenan 110). The narrative moves from narratorial speech to character speech without explicitly stating that this is happening. It

is also important to note that "not all direct discourse represents actual speech spoken aloud, some represents thought (or interior monologue)" (Berlin 98).

The Bible uses a great deal of direct discourse in the forms of monologues, dialogues, or interior monologue. In a careful reading of Genesis 12-17 the predominant form of speech is dialogue with an occasional example of interior monologue. Since speech usually leads to action of some sort (or inaction), as I examine what is said I will also examine what is done.

It was impossible to use description, whether of physicality or clothing, to help characterize יהוה. Indeed, as we saw, there is not a great deal of this type of description anywhere in Genesis 12-17. There are, however, numerous words and deeds that we can examine in relation to characterization.

Genesis 12

Genesis 12 begins with a speech by יהוה addressed to Abram. This is the first time יהוה has spoken to a human since He told Noah and his sons to be fruitful and multiply in Genesis 9. יהוה also made a covenant with Noah and his children. He tells them what they can and cannot eat (9:3-4), and that they are not to kill, but must care for one another (9:5-6). He also promises never again to destroy the entire earth in a flood (9:11). The sign of this

covenant is the rainbow (9:12-13), and after it is established God does not speak to man until He calls Abram approximately 300 years later.⁸

Abram's story is similar to Noah's in many ways. Both are called by יהוה to do monumental tasks. Noah was to preserve the animals and a trace of humanity and Abram was to build a new nation from the descendants of Noah. יהוה makes promises to both men. Noah is told that there will never be a similar flood. In Genesis 12:2-3 Abram is promised that he will be made a great nation through which all other nations will be blessed. What does this imply about Abram and God? Since Abram was called upon to work for יהוה who made him great promises as Noah was, it is feasible to draw parallels between the two men. If Noah "was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God" (Genesis 6:9 RSV), then we can surmise that Abram was also a righteous man who was close to יהוה. This also implies that righteousness and faith were important to יהוה.

Once again יהוה's power is in evidence, as the narrator tells us in Genesis 12:4. His words in v.3-4 are obeyed immediately, without hesitation or question. The text relates the call, promise and Abram's response in very

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This is a rough estimate based on the information in Genesis 11.

quick succession. יהוה speaks. Abram acts. His trust is clear and his obedience evident.

However, Abram may not follow יהוה's dictates to the letter. Genesis 12:1 is a problematic verse. The verse reads as follows:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָם לֵךְ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית

The Jewish Publication Society translates this as "the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you." (JPS)." It has also been translated as "Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kinsmen and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (RSV)." The verse should be translated something like this, "And the Lord said to Abram, "Go out of your land and from your relations and from the house of your father to the land which I will show you (make you see)"." Since there is a possibility that יהוה told Abram to leave his home and family, Abram did not follow His instructions completely. He took his wife (who was not technically family in the sense of blood-kin) but more importantly he took his nephew, Lot. Abram may have responded quickly, but he did so in his own way. Why? Was Lot his designated heir? Did יהוה permit this infringement to make the transition easier for Abram? We cannot tell from the information provided here. The

narrator did not see fit to give us these details.

Once Abram reaches the promised land, יהוה addresses him again (Genesis 12:7). We now learn that יהוה intends the land for Abram and his descendants, yet if we re-read v.4-5 it is implied that he has no offspring, and it may be that Lot was his intended heir. These verses list all the persons accompanying him - Lot, Sarai and their servants - no children. Lot may have been a considered heir, but we are not told. What we are told is that the land is promised to Abram's *offspring*. Now יהוה is not just promising to make Abram the leader of a nation, but the leader of a family as well.

In response to יהוה's latest communication Abram built an altar where He had appeared. But Abram is still unsettled. He moves on and for a while dwells between Bethel and Ai (12:8) where he erects a second altar to יהוה. After another brief pause he moves again, in the direction of the Negeb (12:9). Despite the fact that יהוה promised him the land of Canaan (12:6-7), Abram does not seem ready to settle there.

In 12:10 Abram is again travelling. This time he goes down to Egypt because there is a famine in Canaan. The journey is comprehensible this time but his request of Sarai is not. Just prior to their arrival, he asks Sarai to say that she is his sister, ostensibly because he fears the Egyptians (12:11-13).

The narrator provides this information in the form of direct discourse but Sarai is not allowed to respond.

Part of Abram's prediction is confirmed when the Egyptians see how beautiful Sarai is and recommend her to Pharaoh (12:14-15). None of this occurs in the form of a conversation. It is all related by the narrator. Since this much of Abram's fears proved true, it is possible that he was right to fear for his life. If he died childless there would be no way for יהוה to fulfil the promise. Because of their ploy, Abram acquired more wealth than he had when he left Haran.

In Genesis 12:17 the narrator tells us that יהוה afflicted the Egyptians with plagues on account of Sarai. This would seem to imply that He had plans for Sarai, wife of Abram. This is one time when יהוה acts without speaking of His intentions first. This information is presented by the narrator in prose form. This helps colour in our picture of יהוה. Not only does He require great sacrifices from people (12:1) and promise them great reward (12:2-3, 7), He can also cause trouble for those who may interfere with His plans (12:17).

Pharaoh summons Abram and questions him about his actions. Once again the narrator provides us with a direct quotation of Pharaoh's words

(12:18). In 12:17 we are told that יהוה afflicted Pharaoh and the Egyptians. In 12:18-19 we are told that Pharaoh realized something was amiss and that it had to do with Sarai being Abram's wife. We do not know how Pharaoh discovered their plot or if he realized יהוה's role, just that he does know. Pharaoh reunites them and sends them away (12:19-20).

All the speech in this section seems to be in the form of dialogues. There is always at least one character being addressed by another. However, in each instance only one character speaks. יהוה speaks to Abram. Abram speaks to Sarai. Pharaoh speaks to Abram. There is no vocal interaction; communication is all one way.

All actions in this chapter are contingent upon the words or actions of another. The Lord speaks. Abram goes. Abram predicts the Egyptians' response to Sarai. She is taken into Pharaoh's court. Abram gets rich. יהוה intervenes. Abram and Sarai are sent from Egypt.

Abram's actions show that he trusts יהוה and is willing to obey Him - to a degree. He leaves his father in Haran and sets out for the promised land, but he takes his nephew with him. Perhaps יהוה allows this because He understands the human need for continuity and since Abram had no children Lot was his designated heir. Upon reaching the new land, Abram reaffirms

his belief in and acceptance of יהוה by building not one but two altars (12:7, 8) and calling Him by name (12:4, 8).

His actions in Egypt may cause the reader to question his morals and suitability to lead a nation that will be a blessing to the world. He seems to be prostituting his wife to save himself. Because of his ruse, his wife is taken as another man's wife and Abram receives sheep, oxen, she-asses, camels, and slaves. Abram pimps her, yet it is Pharaoh and the Egyptians who are punished by יהוה, when they are unaware of the true situation. Perhaps this was a test of Abram's ability to survive and prosper in difficult situations. He had to deal with the famine and he feared for his life in Egypt because of his wife's beauty. I do not know if this should or could excuse his actions, but it does clearly illustrate his survival instinct which is probably necessary if you are to found a nation in the midst of someone else's nation.

The Lord's words and actions show a desire for a human intermediary to build His special nation. His call and promises to Abram identify this leader. We also see that He is willing to intervene in human affairs to protect those connected to Abram. The fact that יהוה is portrayed as being present in Haran, Canaan, and Egypt marks Him as different from other deities who were often tied to one locality. Again His strength and uniqueness are in

clear view.

Genesis 13

Genesis 13 begins with further description of Abram's travels after his eviction from Egypt. He seems to retrace his steps, returning to Negeb and then on to Bethel and Ai. This is the site of the first altar he built and once again he calls יהוה by name (13:4). Thus his continued allegiance to יהוה is demonstrated.

In 12:5-6 we learn that not only did Abram have great possessions, but so did Lot and the land could not sustain them if they lived together. In order to quell any trouble between the two semi-distinct groups, Abram suggests complete separation and gives Lot the first choice (12:8). In his words to Lot he stresses their family ties - they are kinsmen and brothers.

Lot's choice of land is interesting. He sees the fertility of the Jordan valley and chooses it as his new home. However, to get there he has to travel east.

In Genesis 3:6, 22-24 the man and the woman disobey God, eat of the tree in the middle of the Garden, and are evicted from Eden. A cherubim is placed outside the gate to prevent re-entry. The man and woman must leave the Garden which was in the east.

The Bible indicates the short-comings of those who live in or move to the east. There can be no return to Eden and by going east a symbolic return is implied. The first person who tries to go east is Cain. After he kills Abel, God speaks to him (4:9-12). Cain does not seem to fully understand what God is saying, and fears that he will be killed (4:13-14). He goes east to try and escape the presence of God (4:16). There he had a family and built a city (4:17).

Another example of eastern folly is the tower of Babel. The people there had a common language (11:1) and decided to build a city and tower to "establish a name for themselves" and so they would not be spread across the world (11:4). The Lord did not like these sentiments. He had told Noah, "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth" (JPS) implying that He wanted mankind to spread. The people of Babel wanted to stay together against the wishes of God. That is why their language became many languages and they were forced to spread (11:9).⁹

This brings us back to Lot. He left Canaan, the promised land to go

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The opinions presented in the preceding 3 paragraphs are based on notes from class lectures given by Professor Kim I. Parker at Memorial University of Newfoundland in 1990.

east to the cities of the Jordan Valley. There is a hint that it is not just the east that is problematic, but cities as well. At this point in Israelite history the nomadic lifestyle of Abraham is preferred to the life of a city-dweller. Lot not only goes east but moves to a city. By doing so he disqualifies himself from a place in the promised land.

Abram, on the other hand, remained in Canaan (12:12), the land to which he was sent and which was promised by יהוה. Abram's choice to remain is shown to be a good one, because the biblical narrator sees fit to inform the narratee-reader that the inhabitants of Sodom were very wicked in the eyes of the Lord (Genesis 12:13). Lot has chosen to live amongst those people. These two points tend to disqualify Lot as the heir since he does not choose well in either instance.

I have already briefly discussed Genesis 13:14-17 when examining narratorial presence. Now however I want to note the content of יהוה's words. He elaborates on the extent of the land which Abram will inherit; everything in every direction as far as he can see is included in the promise. Again יהוה refers to Abram's descendants which up to now have not been produced, and at this point even his nephew is gone. Nevertheless, his descendants are promised to be too numerous to count. יהוה also tells

Abram to "up, walk about the land" (13:17). The tour that Abram had begun in 12:6, 8-9, is now endorsed and commanded by יהוה. יהוה seems to want the man He has chosen to be familiar with the land he is to possess. This is good management practice. Abram must know the land to care for it properly. It is a good psychological ploy too. Abram is more likely to care for and work for a land he knows well, than a strange, abstract area.

In 13:18 Abram resumes his journeying until he reaches Hebron. Here he settles for a time and builds a third altar to יהוה. His actions again show his obedience and devotion to the God who took him from his father in Haran. This God must be very charismatic and compelling, to be able to accomplish this kind of devotion and loyalty.

Genesis 14

There is very little conversation in Genesis 14 until the end of the chapter. The first 17 verses do not refer to יהוה at all. The narrator relays the story of two groups of warring kings. Their actions are relevant only insofar as they engage Abram. In the course of their war, they take Lot captive causing Abram to go to his rescue.

In Genesis 14:13 Abram receives the news of Lot's capture. In 14:14 he gathers his men and pursues Lot and his captors. As previously

mentioned, Lot's captors were four allied kings and their armies, and Abram had only 318 men. Abram showed his leadership skills by waiting until nightfall to attack. This resulted in Abram's defeat of the allies' superior forces and the freeing of Lot and the other captives.

When the triumphant Abram returned to Hebron, he was stopped by the king of Sodom and Melchizedek, king of Jerusalem. Melchizedek speaks to Abram, blessing him and recognizing his military victory, as well as God's help. This, like all previous speech in Genesis 12-14, is one-way dialogue. Melchizedek speaks; Abram listens.

In 14:21 the king of Sodom speaks to Abram. He says "Give me the persons and take the possessions for yourself." For the first time one character responds verbally to another. Abram refuses the offer. Swearing by God Most High, Creator of Heaven and Earth he refuses to accept anything but the supplies used on the return journey (14:22-24). As he says, no one is going to say he helped make Abram a success. That right belongs to יהוה.

The only times יהוה is mentioned in this chapter is in 14:18, 19, 20, and 22. Two of these references are made by Melchizedek, one by the narrator, and one by Abram. It has already been suggested in the section on

Epithets, that these references help portray יהוה as the supreme God who created the heavens and the earth.¹⁰

Genesis 15

Genesis 15 is composed almost entirely of conversation, specifically between יהוה and Abram. The narrator takes a backseat to the characters in this chapter. The majority of the speaking is done by יהוה with an occasional interjection by Abram. Once again יהוה contacts His man Abram, but this time it is slightly different. He sends an emissary, דבריהוה, the Word of the Lord. This entity seems to be there to allay Abram's fears; fears we did not know he had. He is told

אחר הדברים האלה היה דבריהוה אל־אברם במחזה לאמר אל־תירא
אברם:
אנכי מגן לך שברך הרבה מאד:

(Some time later, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying "Fear not, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great." JPS).

Why do I see דבריהוה as an emissary, a semi-independent entity, rather than just as the words of God? This is not an easy question to answer.

Genesis 15:1 is the first occurrence of this phrase in Hebrew Scripture so

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For more information refer back to p.6⁶

there are no preceding accounts to which it can be compared. It occurs once in Genesis 24 and later in the Prophets. However, I will explain it as I see it here in Genesis 15.

דבריהוה came to Abram in a vision and spoke to him. The דבריהוה and Abram have a conversation (15:1-4) but that is not all. In 15:5 in response to one of Abram's questions, we are told, "He took him outside and said . . . ". This implies some physicality or at least some presence beyond mere vocal representation. The text does not say he was sent out but that he was taken. Something had to be there to take Abram outside. There is no reference to God Himself being present as anything but דבריהוה in these verses. This being the case, I feel it is at least plausible that דבריהוה could be more than words. That it could be an emissary like the angels of the Lord.

Abram's response to this renewed promise of reward is important. Having previously been promised reward in the form of nationhood and offspring, we learn that Abram is getting anxious. His response is "Oh Lord God, what can You give me, seeing that I shall die childless . . . ?" (15:2). This is the first time Abram expresses any doubts in the promise יהוה made him.

He is promptly reassured. In 15:4 דבריהוה tells him that his own

child will indeed be his heir and 15:5 once again insinuates the great number of people who will arise from this. The narrator goes on to say that Abram's trust was renewed and "He reckoned it to his merit" (15:6). יהוה does not seem to mind a little doubt, but accepting reassurance promptly is a good trait.

In 15:7 יהוה speaks again. He says, "I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldees to give you this land as a possession," (JPS). This is odd since the first time יהוה speaks to Abram is in Haran (12:1). It was Abram's father, Terah, who took him from Ur to Haran (Genesis 11:31) and there is no indication that יהוה had anything to do with this move. Since this is the case as the biblical narrator presents it, why does יהוה say in 15:7 that He took Abram from Ur? Strangely Abram does not question this part of the statement, but is more concerned with how he will know that he does indeed possess the land.

In 15:9 יהוה tells Abram to bring Him several animals. He does not say what to do with them, but in 15:10 Abram not only brings the animals, he also prepares each in a special way described in some detail by the narrator. In Genesis 15:11 the narrator tells us that Abram protected his sacrifice from scavengers, as he protected Lot from being the prey of Chedorlaomer and his

allies.

The narrator says in 15:12 that Abram fell into a trance at sunset and a great dread fell upon him. This seems to be preparation for what יהוה is about to say to Abram. יהוה makes predictions about the enslavement of Abram's heirs and their eventual release with great wealth (15:13-14). 15:15, located in the midst of the fate of his decedents, foretells a long life for Abram. 15:16 returns to his descendants saying that they will suffer for four generations before their release.

Genesis 15:17 returns us to the narrator who describes what happens to the animals. The narrator says that "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram" (15:18). The promise has gone from a simple verbal promise to a legal contract. The Lord says that the land given to Abram's descendants will encompass the area from the Nile to the Euphrates. In this statement the borders are refined. It is no longer as indeterminate as it was in 13:14-15. Although it is possible that Abram's view encompassed this whole area, we have no proof as to what he actually saw at that time. Now we know what the dimensions of the land are.

In this chapter we see that יהוה tolerates the doubts of Abram and is willing to give him signs of reassurance (15:4, 17). We learn that יהוה also

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sends emissaries to do His work and these seem to have much of His power (15:1). In Genesis 15, from v.5-16, the reference is to a "He" who may be דבריהוה or יהוה Himself, and in 15:18 the narrator explicitly says that יהוה made the covenant with Abram. Indeed, in 15:2 Abram called דבריהוה "Lord God", אדני יהוה. The sign of the sacrifice seems to be a way for יהוה to physically assure Abram of His sincerity. It is not something He desired for Himself but is implemented at Abram's request for knowledge.

Genesis 16

Children are the main focus of Genesis 16, although there are none physically present. In 16:1 the narrator informs us that "Sarai, the wife of Abram, had borne him no children" (JPS). We are also told in the same verse that she had an Egyptian maid, Hagar. This may seem to be excess information, but it is preparatory to what Sarai says to Abram. In 16:2 she blames יהוה for her childlessness and decides to circumvent this lack by having Abram take Hagar. 16:2-4 describes the process of Hagar being given to Abram who cohabits with her and impregnates her. In a way, Sarai is doing to Hagar what Abram did to Sarai in Egypt. Both women are given to some man without any thought for her feelings.

Hagar does not accept her secondary status once she conceives, but

demeans Sarai because she has not conceived (16:4). We are not told how she shows her disrespect just that this is the case. However, instead of dealing with Hagar, Sarai blames Abram. Despite Sarai's belief that her barrenness is due to יהוה, her belief in His power is evident (16:2, 5). She challenges Abram to have יהוה choose between husband and wife, to see who is right. Abram does not turn to יהוה for answers but tells Sarai to handle it herself (16:6).

Out of jealousy because of Hagar's pregnancy, or revenge for her humiliation at not being able to conceive, Sarai is mean to Hagar. Hagar flees from the situation and is addressed by an angel of the Lord, מלאך יהוה. This being calls her by her name and her social status, "Hagar, slave of Sarai" (16:8). This reminds her and us that Hagar's will was not her own. She was a slave, a possession, of Sarai. The angel sends her back to her mistress, telling her to submit to Sarai's treatment. He does alleviate this somewhat by making her a similar promise to the one made to Abram, "And the angel of the Lord said to her, "I will greatly increase your offspring, And they shall be too many to count." (JPS)." The angel goes on to foretell the sex and future of the unborn child (16:11-12). The words of the angel reaffirm our view that יהוה expects obedience but that He also rewards it. If

Hagar returns to her place as Sarai's slave, her offspring will be too many to number (16:9).

Her response to this speech is interesting. We have already discussed the meanings of the names in this section, but I would like to reiterate a few points. Hagar calls the one who spoke to her El-roi, אֵל רֹאִי, which the narrator translates as "Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me!" (16:13 JPS). This would imply that people were not supposed to survive a vision of or personal encounter with יהוה unscathed. The being who approached Hagar had the powers of יהוה. However, it was an angel of יהוה, and not יהוה Himself, and therefore it probably did not have His presence. This is perhaps one reason why Hagar survived the encounter as she did.

Genesis 17

About three-quarters of this chapter is composed of the words of יהוה to Abram. The narrator is present long enough to introduce who is speaking, and to insert brief descriptions in a few places.

In 17:1 יהוה appears to Abram. Not an emissary, but יהוה Himself, as He has done before (12:7). He speaks to Abram, telling him His name, אֱלֹשֶׁדַי, (El Shaddai,) God Almighty, and to walk in His ways and be blameless. In 17:2 יהוה again refers to the covenant and Abram's

descendants. Abram's response in 17:3 was to prostrate himself before אלהים, in a position of respect and servitude.

Why does יהוה become אלהים in Genesis 17 and what significance does it have for His characterization? It is יהוה who called Abram to leave Haran and who made him the original promise, and it is יהוה who has been with Abram throughout all his adventures. For the first time in the Abrahamic saga אלהים stands alone as the name of the Deity.

In 17:1 יהוה becomes אל שדי who becomes אלהים in 17:3. It is as אלהים that He fully defines the terms of the covenant and introduces its physical sign. It is אלהים who gives Abram and Sarai their new names. But what does this mean?

It is obvious from the text that Abraham makes no distinction between the Being he addresses as יהוה and the one he addresses as אלהים except for one instance. He prostrates himself before אלהים, something he has not done before.

Much of this has already been discussed in **Biblical Epithets**, but in this section I want to note that אלהים restates Abram's position as father of, now, many nations. Abram's change in status required a change in his name to "Abraham" (17:4-5). אלהים promises Abram numerous descendants and

maintenance of the covenant (17:6,7). In 17:8 אלהים also states that Canaan is to be their everlasting possession. Throughout this re-iteration and refinement of the original promise in Genesis 12:1-3, Abraham says nothing but is presumably still on his face.

אלהים said He would be their God (17:8) but they must keep His covenant (17:9). The sign of that covenant was the circumcision of every male, free and slave (17:9-13). Anyone who refused to be circumcised would be denied by his kin because he broke the covenant.

אלהים also speaks to Abraham about Sarai, now Sarah (17:15). He says she will be blessed and will bear a son. She is Abraham's true procreative counterpart (17:16). In 17:17 the narrator tells us that Abraham again throws himself on his face, but we were not told he had stood up. This time he also laughs and speaks to himself, incredulous that he and Sarah should be parents at their age. Of אלהים he vocally requests protection for Ishmael. This is the only time that Abraham speaks in Genesis 17.

אלהים responds by saying that it is through Sarah's son that the promise will come to fruition, and that the name of this child shall be Isaac. God also agrees to bless Ishmael and make him fertile, the father of a great nation (17:20). The original covenant will be maintained through the younger

brother, however, and having said all this, אלהים departs from Abraham (17:21-22).

The narrator takes over at this point, summarising Abraham's response to all that אלהים had said. His immediate reaction is to institute circumcision as the sign of the covenant (17:23). Abraham is 99 years old and Ishmael is 13 years old, but they and all the males of their household are circumcised in accordance with the covenant (17:24-27).

Abraham's rapid response shows his belief in the trustworthiness of אלהים. It also shows his devotion, faith, and willingness to act quickly to affirm the covenant with אלהים/יהוה. He and his God seem to have chosen well when they chose one another.

Every time אלהים speaks to Abraham about the promise and the covenant, there is more information about them. First Abram is made the general promise of a new land and nationhood (12:1-3). In 13:14-17 he is told the general dimensions of the land. In Genesis 15 the trials of his descendants are described and a first covenant is made between Abram and יהוה (15:18) defining the borders of the land. In Genesis 17 יהוה reaffirms His previous statements about the land and Abram's offspring, and finally institutes the outward sign of the covenant, circumcision. יהוה has gradually

added to and refined what He expects from Abraham and what He will give him.

I believe this shows a great psychological insight. Instead of dumping everything in Abram's lap all at once, יהוה presents things gradually. This allows Abram to adjust to and accept what is required a little at a time. It also allows יהוה to observe Abram to see if he is suitable for the task. As we will see in Genesis 18, יהוה is not rigid and uncompromising. He is multifaceted to say the least. The אלהים aspect finalises the terms of the covenant and implements the sign of circumcision but He is one with יהוה and אל שדי. One God with many faces that tell us of His power and abilities. Some of His traits may be continuous but they are always being added to and built upon.

CHARACTER TYPES

I have already discussed how biblical characters are portrayed through an examination of their physical appearance, names, and what they say and do. What I want to do in this section is to briefly discuss if the main characters of the Abrahamic saga fit into any of the traditional character types. I wish to see if any of these categories apply to the biblical

characters.

The traditional character types were described in chapter one, and they consist of the categories "flat" and "round". The flat characters are "generally constructed around a single idea or quality" and they "do not develop" (Rimmon-Kenan 40). Round characters are the opposite of flat. They have numerous traits and seem to develop somewhat in the course of the story. Berlin prefers to use different terms: full-fledged, agent, and type (Berlin 23). "Full-fledged" characters roughly correspond to "round" characters and "flat" are generally equated with "type". Her third category, that of "agent", sees characters as functionaries in the text. No character has to be stuck into one category and left there. Indeed, many of the main biblical characters move from one character-type to another and back again.

For instance, the fugitive who brings Abram the news of Lot's capture is a functionary. He appears once and serves to motivate Abram to go to Lot's rescue. In turn this event helps to characterize Abram, and indirectly יהוה.

Ishmael may be considered a flat character or an agent. In Genesis 16:11-12 he is an unborn child who "shall be a wild ass of a man". In these chapters he is never given a chance to be anything else.

In Genesis 12-13 Sarah is a flat character. She is "Sarai, wife of Abram". In Genesis 16 she becomes a barren woman with ideas on how to handle this state of affairs (16:1-2). We also learn that she feels wronged by Hagar and blames Abram (16:4-5). As a result of Hagar's attitude, Sarai becomes a harsh woman (16:6). We see her here in greater colour as our picture of her is filled in. We can see her as a frustrated woman, longing for a child and willing to take extreme measures to fulfil her dreams. We can also understand the hurt she must feel at Hagar's ability to become pregnant, and thus her consequent actions can also be understood.

Most of this is not explicitly provided in the text directly by a character or by the narrator. It is inferred by the reader, and therefore may be considered subjective. However, it can be supported by comments found in the text of Genesis 16. Thus Sarai moves from flat to more fully-fledged.

Abram is the hero of these biblical chapters. He is present in every chapter and is usually of central importance.¹¹ In Genesis 12 Abram is a man who follows the commands of יהוה. We see him as a husband and an uncle. A travelling man. But we also see him as an insightful, somewhat deceptive

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The possible exception is Genesis 16 which is predominantly concerned with Sarai, Hagar, and children. Abram is of secondary, almost functionary, importance in this chapter.

and self-serving, man in Genesis 12:10-16. He portrays his wife as his sister, he lies to the Egyptians, and he gets rich quick because of this. This is not the picture of a man to inspire wholesale admiration.

In Genesis 13 Abram is an intelligent shepherd, aware of the need to let his nephew go, to remain emotionally close. Genesis 14 continues the development of Abram. He becomes an able militia-man as well as a man totally devoted to his God. Genesis 15 tells us that Abram fears, though it does not tell us what he fears. He also has the nerve to question the promise of יהוה but accepts His reassurance.

In Genesis 16 Abram is less full-fledged, acting more as a functionary. Yet there are still aspects of his character being developed. We see his acceptance of Sarai's course of action to produce children, showing his own desire for offspring. He is quite willing to allow Sarai to deal with certain things on her own. He does not need to have a finger in every pie.

In the final chapter of importance here, Genesis 17, Abram is fairly silent. He shows his respect or awe of יהוה by prostrating himself for the first time in their relationship. Perhaps this is indicative of the change that is about to take place in that relationship. Abram is not afraid to request recognition for his first born, even though יהוה Himself said that his younger

brother will be the true heir.

Throughout the course of these six chapters there is more and more information on Abram, both directly revealed and implied in the text.

What is there to say about יהוה, our main interest? Sternberg says that, "God himself does not change - even this, by the way, is in an inference - our acquaintance with him frequently and at times surprisingly does" (Sternberg, 322).

In Genesis 12 there is nothing said directly about יהוה except that He afflicted the Egyptians with plagues because of Sarai (12:17). Other than this we surmise that He is charismatic or compelling since Abram leaves his father to go to a new land at His word. We can also deduce that He makes promises and gives reward to those He chooses.

Genesis 13 further explores יהוה's promises and it is also foretold by the narrator that יהוה has the power to destroy (13:11).

The fact that He is believed to be the creator of the Heavens and the Earth is revealed in Genesis 14 (18-20), and as said already this refers the narratee-reader back to Genesis 1 and the actual act of creation.

In Genesis 15 we learn that יהוה can either contact His chosen directly or through emissaries (15:1). His promise making is further explored in

Genesis 15:1, 4, 18-20, as is His ability to foretell the future (15:13-16). We encounter another emissary in Genesis 16:7-12 who can also foretell the future as well as name unborn children.

יהוה Himself returns in Genesis 17 to rename His chosen (17:5) and his wife (17:15), to cement the covenant (17:1-2, 4-14), and to bless Sarai, Ishmael, and Isaac.

As Sternberg says, the basic characteristics of יהוה do not change. He is always a powerful, compelling being. As well, our knowledge of and acquaintance with Him are constantly changing and growing. However, it seems to me that even though there is an underlying trait of power, the portrayal of יהוה in Genesis 12-17 is never flat. He never has just one characteristic assigned to Him but does have several throughout the unit. Therefore, I think that it can be said with some support that יהוה is at no time flat, but is always full-fledged and well-rounded in Genesis 12-17.

CHAPTER THREE

WHAT IS יהוה LIKE IN GENESIS 18-23, 25:1-18?

INTRODUCTION

In Genesis 12 יהוה called Abram from Haran, promising him nationhood in a new land, Canaan. Abram left Haran and went to the new land. There was a famine there so he went on to Egypt where he became wealthy by prostituting his wife to Pharaoh, claiming that Sarah was his sister. Pharaoh discovered their ruse and husband and wife were reunited.

Abram and his entourage continued to travel in Genesis 13. He and Lot separated because of conflicts between their herdsmen. Lot went to the Jordan Valley; Abram stayed in Canaan, the promised land. יהוה made His promise to Abram a second time, this time expanding it to include Abram's offspring.

The kings of the area went to war in Genesis 14. Lot was taken captive and Abram went to his rescue. Upon returning from the successful campaign, Abram encountered the kings of Sodom and Salem. Melchizedek, king of Salem, addressed Abram as one in the favour of אֵל עֶלְיוֹן, God Most High. The king of Sodom wished to make a deal with Abram but he refused. It seems as if it is to יהוה that he will turn for his

success. The Lord does not speak or act in this chapter.

In Genesis 15 the word of the Lord addressed Abram and the original promise was expanded a third time. Abram was promised that he would have an heir to inherit the promised land and a sacrifice was carried out to seal the deal. There were warnings attached to the promise but all will be well in the end for Abram and his descendants. Not only will they own the land, they will rule the many other peoples there as well (15:18-21).

The lack of an heir was again addressed in Genesis 16. Sarai was barren so she gave her maid to Abram in hopes of having a child in this manner. However, once the child was conceived, she was ambivalent about it at best and she was harsh to its mother. Hagar fled but was sent back by an angel of the Lord. She was given a promise of numerous offspring and assurances about her son's future.

Finally in Genesis 17, the promise was more fully defined and the covenant was established. Names changed to reflect the new status of the characters. The sign of the covenant was instituted. Also of importance was the promise of a child with Sarah, Abraham's wife. This child will be called Isaac and he will inherit the land and promise. Ishmael was not forgotten but relegated to secondary status in favour of his younger brother. The promise

of Isaac was made to Abraham and Sarah does not seem to be aware of it.

By the end of Genesis 17 Abraham has one son, Ishmael, and another promised but not yet conceived. This meant that the promise and covenant, while defined, are not fully finalised. The promised inheritor is not yet born and so cannot take over Abraham's position after his demise. It is at this point of uncertain stability that Genesis 18 opens.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

As we saw in Genesis 12-17 names often help to characterize God. However, it is not always His own names that do this, but the ones that He or His emissaries bestow upon the human protagonists. I will again examine the character of יהוה by studying the names of the other relevant characters in each chapter, as well as His own.

Genesis 18

The main characters in Genesis 18 are the Lord, Abraham, and Sarah. Once again Sarah is defined in terms of her relationship to Abraham. She is his wife (18:9, 10). However, she is also Sarah the woman eavesdropping (18:10). She is the aged woman beyond childbearing (18:11). She is Sarah the incredulous old woman who laughs at God's promise (18:12), and she is

the frightened lying woman (18:15). By comparing these traits with those we saw in Genesis 16 we get a more colourful picture of Sarah.

In Genesis 16:1 we discovered that Sarai was a barren woman and wife who seemed to have no hope of ever being a mother. This idea is supported by the fact that Sarai gives Hagar to Abram to breed. She is then harsh to Hagar and uses her power to make Hagar's life difficult.

Sarai's name change in Genesis 17 reflects the change in her status as Abraham's wife. She is now the most important woman in the group to which she belongs as she is to be the mother of its future leader.

A fact that remains constant in these three chapters is that Sarah has remained barren despite God's repeated promise to Abraham of multitudinous offspring. This is additionally important in light of the fact that God promised Abraham offspring *specifically* through Sarah in Genesis 17:16. However, her reaction (18:12) of laughter upon hearing that she will have a child in the future echoes the response of Abraham in Genesis 17:17. In fact not only do both laugh, they both question the possibility based upon their age. Neither feels that they are capable of having children together at this late stage in their lives. The difference between Abraham and Sarah is that God seems to accept Abraham's laughter whereas He questions Sarah's response and in fear

she lies about her reaction. God knows the truth though.

Sarah is in many ways like her husband. Just as he is led by יהוה, she is led by Abraham. She does what Abraham asks her, as Abraham does what יהוה asks of him. They both exhibit a slightly selfish streak. Abram prostitutes Sarai to the Egyptians, and Sarai in return prostitutes Hagar the Egyptian to her husband. Both Sarah and Abraham also demonstrate the ability to lie when they feel threatened (12:11-13; 18:15).

Abraham has several epithets in this chapter. When speaking to his visitors he calls himself their "servant" (18:3, 5), and then "dust and ashes" when talking to God (18:27). Sarah calls him "my husband" (18:12). יהוה says he will be "a great and populous nation" (18:18).

It is interesting that in Genesis 18 the name "Abraham" does not appear until 18:6. Before this point יהוה appears to a man sitting by his tent. This man rushes forward to offer hospitality to his visitors (18:2-5) calling himself "your servant" (3, 5). In 18:6 we learn that this anonymous servant is Abraham, for it is he who orders the preparation of refreshment for the visitors. In that he does provide food and drink for the men he does serve them, and although the text does not tell us, he may have recognized God in the three men. 18:1 does say that יהוה appeared to him and this is not the

first time (12:7; 17:1). Yet, 18:2 says that there were three men.

The fact that Abraham refers to himself as "dust and ashes" is easy to explain on the surface. He is challenging what God plans, but he does not want to seem to be overstepping his bounds. Calling himself dust and ashes is meant to show his awareness of his insignificance, at least superficially. It also points the reader back to the creation stories in Genesis 1-3. The Lord God created man out of dust (Genesis 2:7). It also harkens back to the scene in Genesis 3 where God makes man mortal (3:19) saying that man will return to the ground from which he was formed. The phrase "dust and ashes" is a recognition of these events, whether Abraham is conscious of them or not.

Once again in Genesis 18 God is predominantly called יהוה. This occurs 15 times. However, in 18:25 Abraham reveals another of God's traits by calling Him the "Judge of all the earth". יהוה is not just the deity to whom Abraham gives allegiance. He is also the one who judges the entire world, the one who decides what is right and wrong.

What do we learn about God from our examination of the names? Abraham's reference to himself as "dust and ash" and "servant" illustrate his basic acceptance of the will of God. When God appears, whether by Himself or in the three men, Abraham recognizes Him and treats Him with respect.

Abraham seems to know the scope of God's power and bows before it.

Abraham acknowledges this power by the use of the terms "my Lord" and "Judge of all the earth". The names do not reveal a great deal more than we already know, but His role as Judge once again expands our knowledge of Him.

Genesis 19

In Genesis 19 the multiple aspects of God are again reflected in the terms referring to Him. The two men who left God and Abraham in 18:22 become angels in 19:1. Lot recognizes them as important and addresses them as "my lords" when offering them his hospitality. However, he and the people of Sodom initially see them only as men (19:5, 8, 10, 12).

Only after the townsmen attempt to take the visitors, do they reveal themselves as harbingers of God's intentions (19:13). In 19:15 they are again called "angels" but in 19:16 become "men" again. In 19:18 Lot refers to them for the last time as "my lords". The terms used to refer to them alternate but it is obvious that they are the same beings. Indeed, after they deposit Lot in Zoar, they disappear from the action to be replaced by God Himself in 19:24. In 19:24, 27 God is יהוה but in 19:29 He becomes אלהים. In 19:24 the Lord destroys Sodom and Gomorrah but the narrator restates this point in

19:29 with the name "God". The text makes it clear that "the Lord" and "God" are the same being. This reaffirms what I said in Chapter 2 about יהוה and אלהים being the same deity. The reference to אלהים destroying the cities of the plains also reminds the reader of the אלהים who created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1). The God who can make can also break.

In Genesis 19 Lot replaces his uncle, Abraham. He, like his uncle, is sitting at an entrance when the angels of God arrive. He also rushes to offer them hospitality calling himself "your servant". The narrator always refers to him as "Lot". The people of Sodom call him an "alien" and sarcastically "ruler". He is not explicitly called husband or father but he has a wife (19:16) and daughters (19:6, 14). In this he is both like and unlike his uncle. He has offspring but they all seem to be female and therefore are ineligible to inherit. His wife and his daughters remain nameless, even the two girls who escape from Sodom with him. They are known only as "the older one" and "the younger one".

It is ironic that despite his fertility, Lot's legacy is infamy. He left the promised land and his uncle for a land of depravity. He was spared from its destruction because of his uncle. However, in fear he left Zoar to live in the hills instead of returning to his family in Canaan. He was intoxicated by his

daughters and has sexual relations with them unknowingly. The result was the birth of two sons who father two Semitic nations who will be both bane and balm to the future Israel. This is the last we hear of Lot in the Abrahamic saga.

Genesis 20

There are four characters to examine here: Abimelech, Abraham, Sarah, and God.

In this chapter Abraham and Sarah are travelling again, and this time they end up in Gerar. For some unexplained reason Abraham is again claiming that his wife is his sister (20:2, 5, 12). Other terms used to identify Sarah are "the woman" (20:3), "the man's wife" (20:7), "my wife" (20:2, 11, 12, 14) and "my father's daughter" (20:12). These words and phrases all indicate that Sarah is under the control of her husband or someone besides herself. This is especially evident in the line where God says that Abimelech will die because of "the woman" (20:13). Sarah is not even allowed her name here but is determined by her sex and marital status. She is nothing more than a pawn once more. In 20:7 God refers to her as "a man's wife". He does not seem to grant her status or humanity, but treats her as an object, a possession of Abraham's.

Abimelech is called by his name consistently throughout this section (9 times) with only one variation. In 20:2 he is introduced for the first time as "Abimelech, king of Gerar", by the narrator.

Abraham is referred to predominantly by name by the narrator, but is also known as "my brother" (20:5, 13, 16). God also calls him a prophet in 20:7. This is the first and only time he is ever called such in the story and it is the first instance of this word in the Bible. The word does not occur again until Exodus 7 in relation to Moses. This once again illustrates the uniqueness of Abraham.

There is not much revealed about אלהים in the epithets of the other characters. Sarah's role and relationship to Abraham have not changed, although we now have textual evidence that they may indeed be siblings. Abraham is still his paranoid self (20:2). Abimelech is a man who falls for the wrong woman. However now, in addition to being God's chosen, Abraham is also given the status of prophet by God, if only temporarily. There is no indication before or after this event that Abraham had or kept the abilities of a prophet as found in the later biblical texts. Thus this incident shows that God could dispense abilities to others briefly, as needed, and rescind them when they were no longer necessary. The names used for God

are just יהוה and אלהים, and do not add to or change our knowledge of Him.

Genesis 21

We are introduced to a new character in Genesis 21 - sort of. Sarah and Abraham are again present but throughout they are referred to only by their proper names. Despite this fact, both become the parents of the heir-apparent in this chapter. The long awaited, long promised son is born and named Isaac.

The name of this child is a word play. As discussed in Chapter 2, the name Isaac, יצחק, is a play on the word for "laughter" or "laugh", שחק (shq). In Genesis 17:17 Abraham laughed when he was told that Sarah and he would have a child together. God named the child after hearing Abraham's laughter. Sarah also laughed when she heard that she would have a child (18:12), reaffirming the appropriateness of the unborn's name. By the time the child is conceived there is already much laughter attached to him. When he is finally born there is even more laughter, presumably the laughter of joy. In 21:6 Sarah says "God has brought me laughter, everyone who hears will laugh with/for me" (JPS). The child's name is a play on the laughter of his parents before and after his birth. God has indeed brought laughter to Sarah

in both her son and his name.

Another character of note is Ishmael. In 21:8 the narrator tells us that Abraham held a feast when Isaac was weaned. Assuming that he was breast fed for about a year, Ishmael would have been about 14 years old at this time. In 21:9 Sarah sees Ishmael but does not call him by his name. In fact, his proper name is never provided in Genesis 21. He is variously called "son" (of Hagar and Abraham, 21:9, 10, 11, 13); a "nation" (21:13, 18); Abraham's "seed" (21:13); "the child" (14, 15, 16), and "the boy". All these terms clearly indicate that the text is referring to Ishmael but neither his parents, Sarah, nor God call him by name. The child Ishmael's relationship to Abraham is not hidden but Sarah calls him the "son of that slave", not recognizing him as Abraham's son. It is the narrator who keeps connecting Abraham and Ishmael as father and son.

Hagar and her place in the household of Abraham comes to light again in Genesis 21. The narrator calls her "Hagar" (21:14, 17) and "Hagar the Egyptian" (21:9). Both Sarah and God call her "slave" (21:10, 12, 13), and the angel of God calls her by her name (21:17). Her secondary status is emphasized, and by association so is her son's. Though Abraham has concern he does not disregard Sarah's demand. Besides, God promised to care for

Ishmael (21:13) and this is assurance enough for Abraham (21:14).

God is very active in this chapter and is present in four incarnations. He is יהוה in 21:1, אלהים in 21:2, 4, 6, 12, 17, 18, 20, 22, 23, and "the Everlasting God", אל עולם in 21:33. The fourth possibility is His manifestation as an "angel of the Lord" (21:17). The only new appellation is אל עולם, the God of forever. This helps strengthen the previous hypothesis that God has no beginning and no end as discussed in Chapter 2 in the **BIBLICAL EPITHETS** section. Now the narrator tells us that יהוה is indeed eternal.

Genesis 22

Between Genesis 21 and 22 there is an undetermined passage of time. Genesis 22 begins with God testing Abraham by asking him to offer his only remaining son, Isaac, as a burnt offering. Throughout this adventure the names of these three main characters fluctuate. Abraham is usually referred to by his name especially when done by the narrator or God (22:1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 19). From Isaac's point of view he is "father" (22:7).

Isaac is many things. He is Abraham's son (22:2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 16); his "favoured one" (22:2 12, 16), and he is "the boy" (22:5, 12).

God, Abraham and the narrator all refer to Isaac as Abraham's son in one way

or another. Both Abraham and the angel call him "the boy". Only God and His emissary refer to Isaac as the "favoured one" (22:2, 12, 16).

Abraham never affirms or denies the feelings associated with this final epithet. Why? Is he hiding his feelings because of the task at hand? Is God privy to his unacknowledged or unexpressed emotions? Is the fact that Isaac is the only son of a long marriage enough to infer his value to his father? We are not told by the narrator who leaves us to fill in the gap as best we can.

In this story the deity is once again multinamed. He is אלהים (22:1, 3, 8, 9, 12) and יהוה (22:14, 16). There is also another angel of the Lord present in this chapter. Because of my previous discussion of this type of entity in Chapter 2, I feel it safe to say that this angel is similar to the other, and in some way a part of God in addition to being His messenger. Therefore there are no new names or epithets applicable to God in Genesis 22 and an examination of those applied to Abraham and Isaac reveal little or nothing that was not already known. One possibly new revelation is God's apparent ability to surmise feelings not explicitly stated. This we have not seen before in the Abrahamic saga.

At the end of Genesis 22 there is a list of Abraham's nephews and nieces, the children of his brother Nahor. As they do not play a role in the

biblical text I am examining, or add to our understanding of God, I will not spend any time discussing them.

Genesis 23

The main characters in Genesis 23 are again Sarah and Abraham, but also Ephron the Hittite. Though God is mentioned He is not directly present in this chapter.

Sarah is called by name and referred to as the wife of Abraham. But most importantly here, she is dead and is repeatedly labelled as such. Sarah is no longer among the living and it is because of this that Abraham begins business dealings with the Hittites.

The narrator consistently calls Abraham by name throughout the chapter. The Hittites as a group address him as "my lord". This is a term of politeness, but it is also the titled applied to God at times (18:3, 27, 30, 31, 32, 19:18, 20:4), אדני. It is not however the same word that is translated as "Lord" in English out of respect to the Divine Name, יהוה.

Of note in this situation is the Hittites recognition of Abraham as "the elect of God" in 23:6. This phrase נשיא אלהים which the Hittites use can be translated as "a minor prince" or "chief" of God. The meaning behind it is to identify Abraham's special relationship with God. A point of interest about

this word, אֲרֻכָּ, is that this is the first appearance of it in the biblical text.

Again Abraham's uniqueness is illustrated. Further interest lies in the fact that the narrator refers to the Hittites as the "people of the land" (23:7, 12, 13).

The Lord has said that Abraham's descendants will own the land, that means these people will be assimilated, displaced, or conquered. However, they seem quite willing to sell him a piece of land that has already been promised to him. Perhaps they are getting what they can for the land while they still have the chance.

God is not present as I have already said, except in the person of Abraham as His "elect". There is nothing here in the names of any of the characters that helps us to colour in our picture of God. This is probably the first time that we can gather nothing at all from the names in the text.

Genesis 25:1-18

This is the report of Abraham's death and he is never anything but "Abraham". There is the mention of a second wife, Keturah, and their children's names are listed. Isaac and Ishmael also return to the story, both as sons of the same father. Again Sarah is called "the wife of Abraham" (25:10) and Hagar is identified as Sarah's slave (25:12).

The narrator takes the opportunity in this chapter to state one final time

the relation of each character to Abraham. He and Sarah are husband and wife even in death. Isaac and Ishmael are his sons, and Hagar is Sarah's Egyptian slave. The children of Abraham and Keturah seem to be considered "the sons of concubines" and are provided for before they are sent from Isaac.

The names of the sons and descendants of Ishmael are provided by the narrator. This serves two purposes at least. First, it illustrates that God kept the promise made to Hagar in Genesis 16:9-12. Second, this marks the end of Abraham's era and the ascendance of Isaac. The younger brother is now in the position formerly occupied by their father. His is the power and all other siblings must make way for the (true) heir. Isaac's story-proper begins right after the narrator summarizes the line of Ishmael who then fades from view.

What do we learn about God here? Do the characters' names reveal anything? I would say no. As in Genesis 23, the Lord is largely absent. He is briefly mentioned by the narrator in 25:11 when we are told that He blessed Isaac. This is the only time He is mentioned either directly or indirectly.

Having learned nothing new about God by studying the names in these last two chapters, let us now turn to look at characterization through physical description.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

We found very few examples of physical description in Genesis 12-17. What tidbits were there applied to the human cast alone. There were not even any hints about the appearance of יְהוָה. This is a gap that the narrator did not see fit to fill, either because he felt it was unimportant or because he did not believe that יְהוָה could be described as a corporeal being in these stories. However, I wish to look at the additional examples of physical description found in Genesis 18-23, 25:1-18 to see if they help to characterize יְהוָה in any way. Whether they apply to Him directly or not.

In Genesis 19:26 there is something of a description of Lot's wife - but only after she ceases to be human. Upon fleeing from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, she looked back after the angels had said not to do this. She becomes a pillar of salt. Most readers would probably think that her metamorphosis was a direct result of her disobedience to the commands of the angels. This is not, however, explicitly stated in the text.

Lot also has two daughters who flee with him. In Genesis 19:31 the older daughter refers to her father as an old man but there is no indication of his physical appearance. Besides, the agedness of a person is relative to the person assigning it. My grandfather is old to me, but not to my grandmother

who is his contemporary.

There are various comments made about Abraham that, in fictional literature, might apply to how he looks. The first of these occurs in Genesis 18:11, 12.

(11) ואברהם ושרה זקנים באים בימים הדל להיות לשרה ארח פנשים:
(12) ותצחק שרה בקרבה לאמר אחרי בלתי היתה לי עדנה ואדני זקן:

(And Abraham and Sarah became old, advanced in years; and Sarah happened to stop in the manner of women. And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I do not live anymore shall I have sexual pleasure, and my lord old?")

Once again reference returns to age. Abraham and Sarah are both said to be old, and from the text we learn that they still do not have children. This should remind the reader of the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 17:16-17. אלהים promises Abraham a son by Sarah, and he finds it incredible that they should have a child at their ages. Abraham is one hundred, and Sarah is ninety. Nothing is said about what they look like, however, readers are likely to supply a picture of a modern senior citizen to help fill in the visual gaps left by the narrator.

In Genesis 21 we again return to the question of age. 21:2 reiterates that Abraham is old. 21:3 contrasts this with the term "new-born son" applied to Isaac. The biblical narrator hammers home the age difference in 21:5 in

which we are told that Abraham was 100 years old at the time of Isaac's birth.

In 21:7 Sarah reaffirms the fact that Abraham is considered old.

ותאמר מי מלל לאברהם היניקה בנים שרה כילדתי בן זקניו

(And she said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children! Yet I have born him a son in his old age. JPS)

Sarah's age is also of concern in 23:1. The narrator tells us that she lived to be 127 years old but we do not know what she looked like. We are not told if she was still beautiful or if she had become less attractive. Her beauty seems to have ceased being of importance after the affair with the Egyptians in Genesis 12. However, anyone who has seen the corpse of an aged person will probably supply a mental picture of what Sarah may have looked like, even though there is no hint in the text.

Another instance possibly related to physical appearance occurs in 18:12. In 18:11 both Sarah and Abraham are described as "old, advanced in years" by the narrator. In 18:12 Sarah says that she is בלתי, grown old or worn out. Since the narrator also says that she is old this is probably a reliable statement. However, it is no more help than saying she was old in helping us to draw a mental picture of her. Thus, once again, the narrator leaves us with vague references to age that tell us nothing of the characters'

outward appearance or character traits.

The biblical narrator returns to the theme of age in Genesis 25. The narrator informs us that Ishmael lived to be 137 years old (25:17) and that Abraham died at the age of 175 years. Abraham is said to be old in Genesis 25:8 but no indication of his physical appearance is given.

The descriptions of Sarah and Abraham as old in Genesis 18 are useful. Because the age reference was made by a reliable narrator, the fact that Sarah gives birth to Isaac in Genesis 21:2 is important. She is a ninety-year old woman having a child. This fact, along with the narrator's reminder (21:1) that it was יהוה who instituted the pregnancy, again goes to illustrate another of His abilities. He can influence the laws of nature to aid His chosen couple to have the child He promised them.

While there is little or nothing of physical description to help us characterize the human cast in Genesis 12-23, 25:1-18, there may be hints as to a physical aspect of God. In Genesis 12:7 the narrator tells us that יהוה *appeared* to Abraham. There is another appearance in 17:1. In neither of these instances is there any indication as to what God may have appeared as or looked like. What I mean by this is that we are not told if God looked like a human, a cloud, a flame, or anything else. He appeared but we do not know

what Abraham saw.

In Genesis 18 יהוה again appears to Abraham. However, this time the narrator tells us what Abraham sees. He looks up and sees three *men*. What these men looked like we are not told. Yet, the fact that Abraham can see them does imply several things. The Lord appearing, as or with the men (it is unclear which is the case), can be *seen*. Therefore, He must have some sort of physicality. If it as one of the men, He appears in human guise. Though no description is given, the reader can supply the picture of a man to get a general idea of what God might look like in corporeal form.

There is nothing explicitly supplied about God being physical in Genesis 18. However, if the reader accepts that God appeared to Abraham with the same two men who left them in Genesis 18:22, His presence in human form can be implied. The two (of three, 18:2) continued on toward Sodom while God stayed to talk to Abraham. Even implicit reference to God in human form gives the reader the opportunity to supply a mental picture of a physical God.

What does this mean for the characterization of God? If we accept that He appeared to Abraham as a man, it reveals yet another of His abilities. He can take on human, corporeal form when He wants to. He is not restricted to

incorporeality or corporeality, but can utilize whichever is required or useful in any given situation. This is something beyond the ability of any human, and an addition to our knowledge of God.

HE SAID, SHE SAID

As with Genesis 12-17, I intend to examine what is said and done by each of the characters in Genesis 18-23, 25:1-18. I will also note what the narrator may say directly about a character's response to various situations. Despite the fact that at times I may seem to concentrate on characters other than God, this information will hopefully help to colour in our picture of Him.

Genesis 18

Discussing what is said and done in Genesis 18 with reference to God is tricky as He seems to have developed something of a split personality. In 18:1 the narrator tells us that "The Lord *appeared* to him by the terebinths of Mamre". However, the narrator also says that "Looking up, he saw three men standing near him" (18:2). Does this mean that God appeared as three men? Did He appear Himself with two of His angelic cohorts? Since it is not clear exactly what the case is, I will deal with יהוה somewhat separately from the men.

This is the third and final time the narrator says that "The Lord appeared" to Abraham (12:7, 17:1, 18:1). That is not to say that this is the last time they communicate, just that this seems to be the last time they communicate "face to face".

What is Abraham doing while יהוה is appearing? He is sitting at the entrance to his tent but as soon as he sees them he rushes over to offer them his hospitality (18:2). He is the first character to speak in Genesis 18 and his words add to our confusion over how many יהוה actually is. Abraham says, "My Lord, if it pleases you . . .". God appeared to him, he saw three men, but he addresses them with the singular form of the noun, "Lord" not "Lords", אדני. Then he offers them a "morsel of bread" and some water.

After they accept, he runs to Sarah and demands cakes (18:6). He has a calf slaughtered (18:7) and finally presents his visitors not with the bread and water he originally offered, but with curds, milk, and meat - a proper feast. Why did Abraham go out of his way to provide such a meal for strangers? Perhaps he recognized that these were no ordinary travellers. After all, this is the third time that God appeared to him, and this does not include Abraham's encounters with His emissaries. Then again, perhaps he was always that friendly to travellers.

In any case, Abraham went above and beyond the apparent call of duty. He provided his best for the visitors and perhaps it does not matter if he knew who they were or not. His willingness to give what he could shows once again his fitness for leadership.

The actions of Abraham's visitors are of note. After he offers them refreshment, they accept his offer (18:5). When the repast is ready, they eat it. Curious here is the fact that יהוה and His companions sit down to eat and drink (18:8). Why do they do this? Out of courtesy? When in the forms of men, did they need sustenance for their bodies? These questions remain unanswered by the narrator or the text. The gap is left wide open.

In 18:9 the visitors ask about Sarah. One of them says that he will return when it is time for life because Sarah will have a son. Abraham has heard this promise before (17:15-16) but Sarah, who is listening at the tent entrance, hears it for the first time. Her response is the same as that of her husband in 17:17, she laughs and questions the possibility of children at her age.

יהוה, who did not question Abraham's laughter, does question Sarah's (18:13). He says, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?'" This is not quite what Sarah asks herself. She questions their

ability to have sexual pleasure. Although if they are no longer sexually intimate the chance of becoming pregnant is greatly decreased.

When her actions are questioned by יהוה, she denies her laughter because she is afraid. Why? She has not been threatened. God merely asks why she responded as she did, if she doubted His power. Is there more doubt than incredulity to her laughter? Was Abraham's laughter joyful as opposed to Sarah's doubt? We do not know for certain and can only speculate as to why יהוה reacts to her laughter as He does.

After this incident affirming the birth of a child for Sarah and Abraham, the visitors leave. Abraham accompanies them as they go toward Sodom. The narrator gives us this information.

The narrator also provides an interior monologue for יהוה. In this speech He wonders if He should tell Abraham what He has planned, since Abraham is to be the father of a nation and a blessing to the earth. Not only does יהוה use the first person singular, "I", to discuss His plans, He also refers to Himself as יהוה (18:18-19). There is no hint as to His plans until He shares them with Abraham.¹²

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The narrator does say that יהוה would destroy Sodom (13:10), but we do not know that this is the plan now, until 18:20-21.

After יהוה announces His intention to Abraham, the men leave and continue walking on to Sodom. יהוה and Abraham stop and have a conversation (18:22). Once again, Abraham displays his worthiness to be the father of a new nation. He does not placidly accept the decision to destroy everyone in Sodom and Gomorrah. He asks if יהוה is willing to kill the innocent with the guilty. Abraham says that the Judge of all the earth can do nothing less than be just in His actions. Therein begins a bargaining session between God and Abraham.

This conversation illustrates that יהוה is not an unbending, uncompromising, deity. If one of His chosen believes that He is in error, He is willing to listen. He agrees that if there are even ten good people in Sodom He will spare all.

This is not the first time that Abraham has doubts about the Lord's plans (15:2-3, 8, 17:17). It is however, the first time he questions an action not directly related to himself and the promise. Abraham is now defending people he does not know. The only possible exception to this is Lot. Abraham's concern does not seem to be centered on his nephew however, but the righteous people of the towns. יהוה agrees to re-examine His plan before carrying it out. Abraham has demonstrated that he is a fair, just man even

when he will not benefit from his actions. He does seem to be a worthy individual, in this instance.

The final line of Genesis 18 is interesting. The narrator says, "When the Lord had finished speaking to Abraham, He departed; and Abraham returned to his place" (18:33 JPS). This sentence can be read in several ways. The most obvious meaning is that Abraham returned home to Mamre. Another meaning inherent in this line is that having challenged יְהוָה effectively, he becomes once again the submissive, obedient follower. His return may be both literal and figurative.

What have we learned about God? Apparently He can take on human form. In that form He can and does eat and drink, whether out of necessity or courtesy. We have seen that He disliked the actions of the Sodomites and because of this He is going to destroy the town. His mind is not set, however, and He is willing to re-examine His position at Abraham's request. It is also apparent that He does not take umbrage at Abraham's outspokenness. Perhaps He told Abraham His plan as a test of character. If so, I think he came through it quite well. If not, Abraham still showed himself to be a good man.

Genesis 19

In Genesis 19 the narrator plays a more obvious role than in other chapters. There is a great deal of detail presented directly by the narrator. There is also character speech and all this will be studied together.

The narrator begins by telling us that the *men* who left God and Abraham have become two *angels* and that they have reached Sodom (19:1). Here they encounter Lot who is sitting at the town gate. Lot, as Abraham did, approaches them and offers them the hospitality of his home. This seems to be a good omen for Sodom.

At first the men refuse, saying they will spend the night in the town square, but Lot persists. At home, he prepares a feast for them, as did Abraham, and they eat again (19:13). As the narrator tells us in 19:4-5 it is a good thing the visitors went home with Lot. The men of the town surround the house and demand the visitors come out so they can have intercourse with them. The verb root ידע has the meaning of "to know" in a sexual, intimate way. Important here is not just that the men want to do this to the visitors against their wills, but that it is "*all the people to the last man*" (19:4). Only Lot appears to be righteous and God's plan is justified. So much for good omens.

Because of his hospitality and aid, the men warn Lot what is to happen

and tell him to warn his family. When dawn arrives only Lot, his wife and the two daughters he attempted to prostitute the night before are taken from the city (19:16). Lot's weakness is evident in his delay and his reticence about fleeing beyond the hills. He complains that he cannot get that far in time but no concern is shown for the family with him. The angels give in to his request and allow him to go to Zoar, another small town (19:21-22).

Even Lot is not totally good. In attempting to protect the visitors, he offered his virgin daughters to the crowd to do with as they pleased. His mercy seems to be reserved for strangers rather than his own family. Although Lot tried to help the visitors, his actions regarding his daughters again shows his unworthiness to be part of the new nation.

Though willing to tolerate the challenge of a righteous man, יהוה was not willing to tolerate the depravity of Sodom and Gomorrah. Having found the cities void of ten good people, He carried out His plan to destroy them. The narrator steps in at this point providing the details of the destruction at the decision of the Lord. The Lord waited until Lot was safely in Zoar and then utterly annihilated the plain.

The narrator says that Lot's wife looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt. The angels had warned against looking back (19:17) and Lot's

wife seems to be punished because she did. However, this is only implied and not explicitly stated in the text. The reader fills in the gap to make sense of the inclusion of this information.

Abraham, apparently curious about God's decision, returns to the site of their conversation and sees the devastation. The narrator provides no information about Abraham's reaction or feelings. However we are told that Lot was saved because "God was mindful of Abraham" (19:29). This would seem to imply that Lot was spared for the sake of his uncle and not only for any merit of his own.

Lot does not remain in Zoar but does end up fleeing to the mountains to live in a cave. He is accompanied by his two daughters. Lot never speaks again or even has an active role after he moves to the mountains. His nameless daughters take over, specifically the elder daughter. She convinces her younger sister that there are no men left but their father and that they should get him drunk so they may get pregnant (19:31-35). They both do this and conceive, giving birth to sons who become the fathers of the Ammonites and the Moabites (19:37-38). These peoples will be important in the future of Israel, especially the Moabites. However, there is no explanation given as to why the girls believe there are no men left on earth (19:31). They had left the

town of Zoar where there were presumably people. Why did they resort to incest instead of returning there? Again no explanation is given and the reader is left to ponder over this story.

Genesis 20

In Genesis 20 we encounter a story similar to that found in the second half of Genesis 12. The narrator tells us that Abraham is again on the move this time in the region of Kadesh and Shur. They settle in Gerar and Abraham says once again that Sarah is his sister. The result of this is that the king of Gerar takes Sarah.

Let us backtrack for a minute. There is no explanation of why Abraham decided to reuse this ruse. He does not say that he fears for his life because Sarah is beautiful. Indeed, we have been repeatedly told that they are both old. Abraham is at least 100 years and Sarah 90 years old (17:17).

In addition, in Genesis 18 they are promised the birth of a son (18:10, 14). By claiming his wife is his sister, Abraham seems to be putting the promise in jeopardy. How can they have a child when Sarah is living with another man? Or is it possible that Sarah is already pregnant? We just do not know at this point. Since Sarah is at least 90 years old, why does Abimelech even want her? Perhaps she is still beautiful, but again we are not told.

Unlike the event with the Egyptians, God does directly intervene in Gerar. The narrator tells us that He appeared to Abimelech in a dream to tell him that Sarah was a married woman (20:3). The narrator is also very careful to tell us that Abimelech had not touched Sarah (20:4). This information assures us of at least two points. When Abimelech claims innocence, he can be believed since the narrator also confirms this. More importantly, we know that the parentage of any child Sarah might have could not be attributed to Abimelech. The promise is safe.

We are told by the narrator that God knew Abimelech was unaware of the ruse and prevented him from sinning inadvertently (20:6). God also tells Abimelech and us that Abraham is a prophet who can save him (20:7). Why Abimelech needs to be saved is unclear since he, the narrator, and God all proclaim his innocence. Once God warns Abimelech, He steps back and allows events to run their course.

Abimelech would appear to be a good man. He told his people of the vision and all it entailed. Then he summoned Abraham. Abimelech does not ask what Abraham did to him personally, but is concerned for the welfare of his people. He wonders if he has personally offended Abraham (20:9) and he wants answers.

Abraham's response is a little questionable. He says he did not think the people feared God and he would be killed because of his wife (20:11). He adds that they are indeed siblings, being born of the same father (20:12). The narrator gives us information that we did not previously possess through Abraham's words. Abraham says that when they left Haran he asked Sarah to play the charade of siblings. This is the first time the reader hears this information since it is not reported in the previous chapters of Genesis.

Abimelech makes no verbal response to this disclosure, but the narrator tells us that he gave Abraham sheep, oxen, and slaves, as well as Sarah. He also gives Abraham a thousand pieces of silver to clear Sarah's name, as proof of her innocence (20:16). Thus once again, Abraham profits from prostituting his wife. This time at the expense of a clearly innocent man.

After all this Abraham prays for Abimelech and God heals the people. The narrator says that God opened the wombs of the women so they could conceive, however we had not been told they had been closed. This information is given after they have been cured.

In this chapter we learn that God is protective of both Sarah and Abraham, as well as the innocent Abimelech. Labelling Abraham as a prophet reemphasizes his singularity. Despite His arbitrary decision to punish

an innocent man and his people, He keeps His word to heal the people of Gerar at Abraham's request.

Genesis 21

The body of Genesis 21 is conveyed mostly through the narrator with only brief examples of speech. The narrator begins the chapter by telling us that ירהוה took note of Sarah and did what He promised. In other words, she finally got pregnant. Although we know this was the result of some action of the Lord's, the narrator does not tell us what that action was. We are told in 21:3 that Abraham named the baby Isaac as he was told to do in 17:19 when God implemented circumcision as the sign of the covenant. Isaac was circumcised at eight days of age in accordance with this (21:4). Abraham was 100 years old when the child was finally born, twenty-five years after he left Haran and God made the first promise of offspring (12:4, 7).

Sarah shows her joy and jealousy in this chapter. She says that God has brought her laughter in the child. She is happy about this. She is not happy about Ishmael being around Isaac so she tells Abraham to send him away. She does not want Isaac to have to share with his older brother. This seems to be petty and mean. By all accounts Abraham appears to be a wealthy man and there should be no reason to worry over material wealth. In

addition, God already said the promised land would pass to Isaac not Ishmael (17:20-21), so Isaac's future is fairly secure. There is no apparent reason to send Ishmael away except out of jealousy.

For the first time the narrator labels an emotion attributed to Abraham. We are told that Abraham was distressed by Sarah's demand to send Ishmael away (21:11) but he is promptly reassured by God. God makes Abraham a similar promise (21:12-13) about Ishmael that He made to Hagar (16:10-12). The boy will be looked after so Abraham does what Sarah demanded. Why does God do this for Ishmael? Just because he is Abraham's "seed"? He knows that Abraham is concerned about sending Ishmael away. In response to these feelings אלהים says that He will watch over the boy and make him a nation too. This is done to alleviate Abraham's distress and to assure him of Ishmael's future.

The narrator steps back in to tell us the details of the exile. Abraham provided food and water and put Ishmael on his mother's shoulder before sending her away. This seems odd. If we look back to Genesis 16 we learn that Abraham was 86 years old when Ishmael was born (16:16) and he was 100 years old when Isaac was born (21:5). Therefore Ishmael had to be at least 13-14 years old when Abraham sent him away. If this is the case, why

would Hagar carry him on her shoulder (21:14)?

The whole story of Ishmael's exile portrays him as a passive character who does and says nothing. He is described entirely by the narrator, not once by his parents. After their food and water run out the text says that Hagar put him under a bush and left so she would not see him die. It is hard to imagine an adolescent as passive as Ishmael is portrayed. Having left Ishmael, Hagar is said to burst into tears. The implication is that she is upset about the impending death of her son. However, her own predicament was no better.

As He once before heard the cry of the mother, God now hears the son (21:17). The angel tells Hagar not to worry, God heard and will care for Ishmael who will also be a great nation (21:17-18). This re-affirms the promise God made to Abraham (21:13). Hagar brings water to Ishmael and they are saved. We are told that "God was with the boy and he grew up" (21:20) and Hagar married him to an Egyptian (21:21).

Here we see that God does not abandon those He said He would protect, but He does not always step in immediately. He even protects the helpless when they are part Egyptian.

The next part of Genesis 21 relates another encounter between Abimelech and Abraham. Abimelech sees that God is with Abraham and

asks him to swear by God to be honest (21:22-23). However, Abimelech's people are not always truthful. Some of them take a well that Abraham had dug so he turns to the king. Abimelech claims no knowledge of the occurrence (21:26) but Abraham does not respond verbally. Instead he gathers sheep and oxen which he gives to Abimelech as a sign of a covenant between them (21:27). He sets aside seven more ewes which he wants Abimelech to accept as proof that he did own the well (21:29-30). After this is over and Abimelech leaves, Abraham plants a tree and calls on the name of יהוה, as he did at Bethel and Ai, and Hebron, but without the altar.

From this exchange we can tell that God is recognized by people other than Abraham's. They believe in His power and can see how Abraham is special to Him.

Genesis 22

God has done all that He promised Abraham. Abraham is in a new land and he and Sarah have a son. Other nations recognize that God is with him and believe they can deal with him honestly (21:22-23). Abraham has done everything that he has been asked. He left his father in Haran. He traversed the new land (13:17-18). He ultimately trusted in the promises made to him by God (15:6) even though he had some doubts. Abraham

accepted and implemented circumcision as a sign of the covenant between him and God. And he has stood up for the rights of strangers.

In Genesis 21 his son with Sarah is finally born and in Genesis 22 God decides to test him. He asks Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. This is a request and not a demand. יהוה uses the Hebrew phrase נא, "please." There is no hint as to why Abraham is being tested. It seems to be an arbitrary decision on God's part. Though God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, He does not indicate what will happen if Abraham refuses. There is no punishment or reprisal promised for a negative response, nor reward for compliance. There is nothing said to force Abraham to choose one way or the other. However, as he has ever done in the past, Abraham does what God asks him once again.

After this God steps back and His angel steps forward.

The narrator gives us God's words in a speech but Abraham remains silent. He just packs up and heads off to Moriah with Isaac and some servants. When they reach Moriah, Abraham and Isaac go up the mountain leaving the servants behind. All of this is done quickly and wordlessly. We do not know what is going through Abraham's mind or what he told Isaac. One thing we do know is that God calls Isaac Abraham's "favoured" (22:2)

and asks that he be sacrificed.

Upon reaching the hill Abraham gives Isaac the wood for the offering. This seems to be a little grotesque but since Isaac apparently does not know what is planned, it is almost acceptable. Isaac does have questions. On the way up the hill he speaks for the only time in the Abrahamic saga. He asks his father where the sheep is. Abraham gives him the answer that God will provide. This is true in any case. God was instrumental in Isaac's conception and birth, so if he is to be the sacrifice, God indeed provided it. This is the only conversation between father and son and it does not tell us much about their relationship. However, we can infer a trust between them, similar to that between Abraham and God. Isaac expresses his concerns but is easily reassured by his father's response.

The narrator tells us that when they got to the site Abraham built an altar, laid the wood, bound Isaac, and placed him on the altar. All of this is conducted very rapidly with no detail as to how either Isaac or Abraham is reacting or feeling. It happens almost too quickly for the reader to respond. As Abraham is about to sacrifice Isaac an angel stops him. Isaac will be spared because of Abraham's faith in God and a ram is provided for the real sacrifice. The angel re-iterates the promise of land and offspring for the final

time and Abraham goes home.

The narrator does not see fit to give us any information about how Isaac or Abraham feels about what just happened. They do not speak. There is nothing except the information that "they" go to Beer-Sheba together (22:19)¹³. The last thing the narrator tells us is that Abraham's brother Nahor has many children.

God continues to make great demands on the people He chooses. As well, He continues to reward Abraham's faith and trust. Yet here we see the ultimate streak of arbitrariness in God's character.

We can look back over Genesis 12-21 and see further examples of capricious behaviour. The first example being the call of Abraham in Genesis 12. There is no reason given for the desire to found a new nation. More importantly, there is no indication given as to why Abraham was chosen to lead it. The whole saga seems to try to prove that God chose well.

The choice of circumcision as the seal of the covenant is also arbitrary. Why not just set up another sacrifice? Circumcision is a special sacrificial rite. It is the offering of the foreskin as payment for inclusion into the chosen

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An interesting point here is that we cannot be sure who the "they" are - Abraham, Isaac and the servants, or just Abraham and the servants.

people. It is a unique sign between God and His chosen leader, Abraham, but why this particular sign was chosen is not explained.

Neither God's decision to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, nor to inform Abraham of His resolution are arbitrary. The reasons for both are clearly delineated in the text. Sodom and Gomorrah are terribly sinful places and deserve destruction. Abraham is to be the father of a great nation and a blessing to the world. Therefore he has the right to know what God has planned.

God often has reasons for His actions, such as discussed in the previous paragraph. However, this is not always so. There is no place where this is more evident than in Genesis 22. Sometimes what He does seems to be without rhyme or reason. His arbitrary actions are often confusing. The reader must try to piece together the meanings behind them by carefully examining the text.

Genesis 23

Sarah has spoken her last word and committed her last act. We learn in 23:1-2 that Sarah has died at the age of 127 years, in Hebron. Abraham mourned for her but could not bury her because they did not have a burial site, so he approached the Hittites. The narrator introduces and concludes

this chapter. The rest of this chapter is predominantly a conversation between Abraham, the Hittites, and Ephron, with some narratorial comment interspersed.

The Hittites in turn identify him as the elect of God, נשיא אלהים, and tell him whatever he wants is his (23:6). Abraham responds by bowing before them and asking them to intercede with Ephron for the cave of Machpelah. He also says he will pay full price for it. What follows is an interesting example of land acquisition. Abraham and Ephron begin negotiations.

The narrator tells us that they are still among the Hittites as a group, but only Ephron and Abraham speak from this point. Ephron says that Abraham can have the requested land (23:11). Again Abraham bows and offers to pay for the land (23:12-13). 23:15 says that Ephron finally states his price for the land. "My lord, hear me. A piece of land worth 400 shekels of silver - what is that between you and me?" The narrator says that Abraham was agreeable with the price and the land became his to bury Sarah.

There is not much that we learn from this chapter. God fades from an active role in the picture after Genesis 22. He is only present through the words of the human characters and narrator. There is more information about

how land was bought than about God in this chapter.

Genesis 25:1-18

Not a single character speaks in Genesis 25:1-18. The narrator reports everything that happens. We learn that after Sarah's death Abraham remarried and had several other children. Abraham clearly does not have any fertility problems now but this helps to emphasize how special Isaac is. He is the only child of Abraham and Sarah. Because of Isaac's special standing, Abraham sent all his other children away to the east (25:6). When he dies everything is left to Isaac as the others had already been provided for.

Despite the fact that Isaac was the favoured and heir, Abraham also shows concern for his other children. He does not neglect them but makes provision for them before his death. This helps them and highlights Isaac's claim to the estate. A very shrewd move on Abraham's part as the other children cannot complain they were slighted.

The text states that Abraham lived to be 175 years old and died content and was "gathered to his kin" (25:7-8). It is curious that at his death, Isaac and Ishmael come together to see to his burial. The rivalry of the mothers does not seem to have passed to the sons. They place their father in the cave of Machpelah with Sarah. They are reunited.

In 25:11 the narrator tells us that after Abraham died, God blessed Isaac. The promise is evidently passed on to Isaac as foretold. The second generation of the new nation ascends and carries on.

The last six verses of the chapter return to Ishmael. The narrator, like Abraham, never forgets this secondary son. We are told of the descendants of Ishmael and his founding of twelve tribes. Ishmael dies at 137 years old and he was "gathered to his kin" as Abraham was, but whether he was buried with his father we cannot be certain.

We do know that even if God was not present Himself, He kept His promises to care for both Ishmael and Isaac.

WHAT AM I?

Since I used Berlin's categories of character types (full-fledged, type, and agent) in Chapter 2, I will continue to do so here.

Ishmael is usually acted upon or used to initiate the actions of other characters. In Genesis 21 sight of him playing with Isaac (21:11) results in Sarah demanding his exile. Thought of his death causes his mother to cry (21:16). The final time we see Ishmael act is when he and Isaac bury Abraham (25:9). Even this is not a direct vision but one filtered through the

narrator. At no point can Ishmael ever be called a full-fledged character. He most often acts as an agent.

Isaac has a similar role. He causes laughter. His birth causes Ishmael's exile. His presence gives God an effective tool to test Abraham. In only one place does he speak, asking his father where the sacrificial lamb is. There is so little information about him that it is difficult to call him anything but an agent.

Even Hagar is more rounded than the heir-apparent. Though predominantly described by the narrator in Genesis 21, we see Hagar as a mother in fear of her child's life (21:16). She is also a woman touched by God (17:19). Not once but twice, God responds to her distress through His angelic messengers. However, she is still not as rounded as Sarah.

If a flat or type character is built around a single trait, Sarah cannot be called such in Genesis 18. Here we see her as an eavesdropping old woman who finds God's promise laughable (18:12). It is clear that she can lie when she feels threatened or frightened as in 18:15.

Attention does not return to Sarah until Genesis 20. In this chapter she says and does nothing but is acted upon. She is again the prostituted wife as in Genesis 12 and can best be described as an agent. Her presence sets in

motion the curse upon Abimelech and Gerar, and Abraham's profit of the situation, but she does nothing actively.

Sarah is most completely present for the last time in Genesis 21. In this chapter she finally becomes the mother she was promised to be in Genesis 18. She has many traits in Genesis 21 though most of them are implicit. She is a happy mother (21:6) but she is also jealous for her child. She is protective of her son's future and acts on this instinct by telling Abraham to send Ishmael away (21:11). In her last appearance Sarah is full-fledged

The next we see her she is dead. In Genesis 23 she, or her corpse, is the impetus for Abraham acquiring the cave of Machpelah from the Hittites, and in Genesis 25 she is the wife of Abraham with whom he is buried. In these chapters she is not much of anything but a shadowy presence.

Lot is another character who deserves momentary attention. We see many sides of Lot in Genesis 19. He is a hospitable man offering refreshment to strangers. He is strangely protective of the visitors but callous towards his own family. He believes the visitors but is reluctant to act on their words. When he is forced to flee, he complains that safety is too far away. After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah he finally goes to the mountains where

his daughters get him drunk and rape him.

Lot begins the chapter as an active participant in life but becomes increasingly passive until he has no will of his own left. Lot is definitely not an agent or type character. The biblical narrator provides enough explicit and implicit information about Lot for Cecil B. deMille to make a mini-series.

Abraham is the only character to be physically present in every chapter from 18-23, 25:1-18. In Genesis 18 he is the hospitable lord offering sustenance to strangers. He is the childless old man promised a son with his wife. Most important he is the man who is willing to challenge God in the name of righteousness.

In Genesis 19 Abraham does not speak but he is present. He returns to the site of his conversation with God in Genesis 18 to see what had happened to Sodom and Gomorrah. He is not an agent here, nor can he be said to be full-fledged. The characteristic most visible here is curiosity and so he may be called a type character.

Abraham becomes a liar in Genesis 20, claiming that Sarah is his sister and hiding their true marital status. He is a man who did not recognize his God in the people of Gerar and caused them to be cursed. He is also the man who profits by this. Finally he is said to be a prophet who could heal Gerar.

This seems only fair since he caused their problems in the first place.

In Genesis 21 Abraham becomes a father for the second time. He names that child Isaac as he was told to and the child was circumcised in the covenant. Abraham holds a celebration for his son when he is weaned. Something we are not told he did for Ishmael. He is the concerned father in 21:11 but the trusting devotee in 21:12-13.

His faith and trust in God are put to the test in Genesis 22. Upon being asked to sacrifice his son, he silently and quickly complies. He evades his son's question but proceeds with the requested sacrifice. Because of his faith, Isaac's life was spared and the two of them returned to Beer-Sheba.

Abraham is the grieving husband and shrewd business man in Genesis 23. He is also the elect of God sojourning in a foreign land. Finally in Genesis 25 he is the husband of a second wife. He is the caretaker of his children and the dead patriarch. Even in death Abraham is not a flat character but died old and content.

Having said all this about the human cast, what can I now say to relate character types to God? By examining what categories the human characters fall into, we have a model to which we can compare God's character to see if He fits into these moulds. To see if He can be slotted into a single category,

let us look at some of the things we can say about Him.

Generally, He can appear at will to those He wishes. He can go by Himself or in a group (18:2). He can go *as* Himself or send an emissary (19:1, 21:17, 22:11). God can appear or communicate in dreams (20:3).

Besides appearing/communicating with humans what else can God do? We learn in 18 that He will destroy a city because He finds its people too sinful (18:20-21). But this chapter also shows that God can be successfully challenged and reasoned with. He is a just God (18:25,32).

For the most part it is God's emissaries who take center stage in Genesis 19. They appeared in the form of two angels or men who go to Sodom to examine it. They accepted Lot's hospitality and warned him of the impending danger. They also helped him reach safety before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. If these angels are like those we found in Genesis 12-17 they are part of God and therefore reflect His character. Thus although He is not willing to tolerate the depravity of the cities, He will not slay the one man who tried to help His emissaries. However, Lot is also spared out of concern for Abraham (19:29) though we do not know if God told Abraham this.

God is sometimes arbitrary in His actions. He threatens Abimelech

with death because of Sarah even though Abimelech did not know she was married. He, God, and the narrator all attest to this yet the Lord punishes him anyway. There is a way out according to God. Abraham is a prophet who can save Gerar. Upon Abraham's request, God healed the people of Gerar so He is not without mercy.

In Genesis 21 He finally allows or helps Sarah to become pregnant. God assures Abraham that He will care for Ishmael but Isaac is the true heir. Because of His promise to look after Ishmael, He sends an angel to Hagar in the desert to reassure her and He also provides water (21:19). The narrator tells us that He was always with Ishmael (21:20).

The arbitrariness of God comes to a head in Genesis 22. For no apparent reason He decides to test Abraham by asking him to sacrifice Isaac. When He sees that Abraham is willing to do His bidding He sends an angel to stop it. This angel, for a final time, reiterates the promise and Abraham and Isaac leave.

Having tested Abraham's faith and found it true, the Lord has His reassurance that He chose well. After this point Abraham seems to have no further contact with God or His emissaries. God fades from sight until the narrator tells us that He blessed Isaac after Abraham's death. This is not even

directly seen but relayed through the overt narrator.

However, in Genesis 18-22 God is always a vibrant, active, dominant character. He is never just an agent or type character as Sarah and Lot are at times. In each chapter there is more revealed about God than a single trait and He is never just a catalyst for activity. In Genesis 23, 25: 1-18 He is not flat or functionary either. He is simply not there as a character. His work for the nonce was completed in Genesis 22 and He seems to be taking a break.

CONCLUSION

Having surveyed the Abrahamic saga what possible conclusions can we draw about the characterization of God? Have the methods of literary criticism been adequate to the task of characterizing God? What questions have been left unanswered?

First, I would like to say that none of the methods I chose to apply to the biblical text is adequate *on its own* to characterize the biblical characters. By studying the names of the cast we can glean some things about God, but our knowledge is incomplete. We learn some more from looking at what He says and does, but this is still not enough for a full picture of God. However, I believe that by combining what was learned in each section, a portrait of a fairly complex entity will emerge.

Having read chapters two and three carefully, the reader will have noticed that most of the things I have said about God have come from indirect examinations. For the most part, I have gathered my information about God by what is said about Him by other characters and how they react to Him. The only direct method of studying God was the examination of what He said and did. While this was profitable the reactions of the other characters were often just as useful for characterizing God.

Indeed, often when some activity of God is presented it is done by the narrator and we do not see God actually do it Himself. This is the case with the destruction of Sodom and Sarah's pregnancy. So even when we do know what God did, it is frequently filtered or reflected through one of the characters or the narrator.

Because of this my interpretation of the characterization of God is very indirect. Not only do I predominantly employ indirect literary methods for uncovering character traits, but the traits I have attributed to God are often found through the examination of the other characters reactions and relationships to Him. Despite this double indirectness, I believe that the picture developed from this approach is colourful and valid.

Chapter 22 is probably one of the best examples for highlighting some of the limitations of my approach, with regard to names for instance. The names applied to God in Genesis 22, יהוה and אלהים, are limited in their ability to shed light on His character in a way that has not already been discussed in previous sections. Also putting God into a category of character is never easy, and here it is no different. One of the greatest challenges of this chapter is the innumerable gaps about what each of the characters feels. Unfortunately these are gaps that are never filled. Neither the text nor the

narrator see fit to provide the reader with this type of information.

However, overall I think that the approach I used did help highlight some aspects of God's character in the Abrahamic saga that have received less attention than they deserve, among them His concern for Abraham's feelings and His somewhat arbitrary nature. Let us now turn to some of the possible conclusions that may be drawn from my study.

Although there is very little physical description provided of any of the people in the Abrahamic saga, there is the possibility that God has a physical form in Genesis 18. Before and after this chapter He communicates with and appears to various people, but this is the only time there is even a minute hint that God has corporeal presence. In Genesis 18 He appears to Abraham, possibly as one of three men. God even sits down to eat and drink. Though this is the extent of the explicit information, it implies that God had a human-like body. From this it can be said that one of God's traits was the ability to assume corporeal form even though that form is never described. This section is important because it attempts to deal with what God make have looked like even if it is an unclear picture.

The names in the text do help to characterize God to some extent. The names He gives to Ishmael, Abraham, and Isaac all reflect something about

His relationship to them. Ishmael is so named because God heard Hagar's cries for help when she fled from Sarai in Genesis 16. The name is a play on the Hebrew words שָׁמַע אֵל, "God hears". Abraham is renamed because God is going to make him the father of many nations and his new name reflects this change in his life. Isaac's name reproduces verbally all the different occasions of laughter attached to the child before and after his birth. These three examples show how God fits into each of their lives. He saved Ishmael's life. He made Abraham a national leader. And Isaac, the long promised son, brought laughter to his parents through God's intervention. Each illustrates a different aspect of God's personality.

God's own names tell us about Him also. As יהוה we see Him as a great Lord, a being with power and prestige. When He is called אֵל עוֹלָם we recognize Him as the God of forever, the Deity without beginning or end. In the guise of אֵל עֶלְיוֹן and אֱלֹהִים He is the God who created the heavens and the earth. The one with the power to give life and take it all away if you are sinful. This God must be very charismatic or compelling to make a man leave his own father to go to a strange land. This is a God of great and far-reaching powers.

The God of Abraham is known in many lands. He calls Abraham in

Haran (Genesis 12). He plagues Pharaoh in Egypt (Genesis 12). He destroys Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19). Unlike many of the gods of the Ancient Near East, יהוה was not tied to one geographical location and this is very important. He is one of the few, if not the only God, not geographically restricted.

What God says and does tells us a great deal about Him. He is both arbitrary and contemplative in His decisions. When He decides to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, He does so because of the sinfulness of the cities (Genesis 18). God's destructive nature is worthy of note. He does not seem to be vindictive but is reacting to the depravity of the people of the plains and cities. His decision to eradicate them stems from their abhorrent actions and is not just an arbitrary whim. He tells Abraham of His plan because of his position as the father of many nations (Genesis 18).

However, His choice of Abraham in the first place does not seem to have any clear motivation (Genesis 12). Neither does afflicting Abimelech's people when the fault lay with Abraham (Genesis 20). However, the definitive point of arbitrariness comes when God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22). This is the child that God had promised Abraham for 25 years, and all of a sudden for no reason, He demands him back as a test of

Abraham. This is a side of God that deserves more attention than I have given it here.

Another action of God is His promise making. Repeatedly throughout the cycle, He promises the land of Canaan to Abraham as well as a son to inherit it. Each time the promise is made there is new information attached to it until Genesis 17. At this point the promise is completely defined and the sign of the deal is set up. The next time the promise is mentioned in Genesis 23, it is just a simple re-iteration. God also makes promises to Hagar about Ishmael. At the end of the narrative we learn from the narrator that He does indeed keep these promises and Ishmael has prospered (Genesis 25).

A less noted side of God is His concern for the feelings of Abraham. On several occasions He does something for some other character because He is mindful of how Abraham feels about that character. One instance of this is the removal of Lot from the destruction of Sodom. Another is His promise to watch over Ishmael in Genesis 21. This is done because Abraham was distressed over Sarah's demand to send the child away. It is very rare that people note this side of God in the Abrahamic story.

All these aspects of God come to light through a literary approach to the biblical text. The picture of God is multifaceted and quite interesting. In

summary, He is a powerful, charismatic deity. He makes great promises to selected individuals. He is also a deity who demands great sacrifices of His followers in return for the rewards He promises them.

In the Abrahamic saga His role as the creator of the heavens and the earth is recognised. So is His power to destroy any part of His creation He feels deserves it. He is the God of forever, with no beginning or end. God is not an unyielding deity but is willing to compromise if the change is justified.

His powers are not restricted to geographic location but range far and wide. He can be kind and He can be cruel. He can be sympathetic toward and concerned over the feelings of the human cast, but He can also make capricious decisions that may alter our picture of Him.

Though there are many gaps in the story and the text, a fairly clear picture of God can be drawn. He is not in the least a flat, unidimensional character, but one with many traits and characteristics that become apparent through a literary approach to the text. Though His power is constant, I do not agree with Sternberg's assessment of the total constancy of God's character. Some of His traits are carried throughout the story while others emerge during the course of reading.

I hope that this paper has presented some insights that may not have

been realised before. Or that it has possibly raised questions about the text of Genesis 12-23, 25:1-18. I do not believe or claim that I have found all, or even a fraction of, the answers possible in the Abrahamic saga, but I hope I have made a good start at understanding the character of God found therein.

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