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Title of extract: **Introduction Genesis,**

Name of Author: **Turner, L.A.**

Title/Author of book/edition (if applicable): **Genesis. Turner, L.A.**

Name of Visual Creator or other acknowledgement (if applicable):

Journal details –title/Vol/Year (if applicable):

Publisher: **Sheffield Academic Press.**

Pages scanned: **11 – 18 and 97- 100**

Course of Study (Module name and number): **The Book of Genesis TRDL7089**

Name of Designated Person
authorising scanning:

Date authorised: 17.05.17

Moodle/Powerpoint

E. L. Hams

Introduction

The present volume, in keeping with the aim of the series, reads the book of Genesis as a literary whole. This approach no longer elicits the surprise that it once did. However, it is still not greeted with equanimity by many who see the exegete's primary task as that of disassembling a biblical book in order to trace the historical development of, and posit historical contexts for, its constituent parts. From such historical-critical preoccupations we can arguably learn a great deal about the evolution and contexts of biblical books, the ideologies of their putative sources, and by extension of the societies that produced them. The book of Genesis is a parade example of such scholarly endeavour. The Documentary Hypothesis of Graf and Wellhausen, modified in many ways over the last century or so, has had an enormous impact not only on the interpretation of Genesis itself, but also upon scholarly understanding of the history of Israel. Briefly, the hypothesis holds that the Pentateuch as a whole is the end-result of editorial activity that brought together material from four main sources. Arranged chronologically, they are J (Yahwist), E (Elohist), D (Deuteronomist) and P (Priestly), with several centuries separating the earliest J material from the latest P traditions. The details, including the number and nature of the sources, and their historical sequence and contexts, have been debated. Nevertheless, some form of the hypothesis has provided the bedrock upon which research on the Pentateuch has been built. Such study has, by definition, not set out to read the text as a unified literary work. Rather, its *raison d'être* is to foreground elements which it sees as being, for example, inconsistent, redundantly repetitious or contradictory. From such evidence, the underlying sources can be reconstructed, their individual ideological concerns explicated and the evolution of the text clarified. Generally speaking, sections of the text deemed to derive from different sources (e.g. Gen. 1.1-2.4a [P], and 2.4b-25 [J]), are read in isolation from one another, except when the contrasts between the two are being set out. Such scholarly approaches have at times produced work of breathtaking erudition. Its approach, however, to use a helpful analogy, is that of eating a cake in order to reconstruct the recipe from which it has been baked, and assessing the origins and qualities of its individual ingredients, rather than savouring the cake as a finished product. There are still those who hold to some version of the Documentary Hypothesis, but it no longer commands the respect of all. A

number who accept that its historical analysis of the text's conception and growth is correct, concede that its predominantly historical and atomistic approach to the text should not veto all other readings. The present commentary is not written as a polemic against the Documentary Hypothesis, or other source-critical theories, though I must admit to more than a mild scepticism.

In most respects the methodology I have adopted is similar to that employed in my previous volume, *Announcements of Plot in Genesis* (Turner 1990a). Since Genesis is a narrative book, I have chosen to foreground *plot*, which gives a narrative its essential quality and the absence of which would relegate it to being a mere chronicle. Many episodes in Genesis that appear on the surface to be simple and independent, are actually complex and interconnected. Thus, to use the example of the two creation stories cited above, which source critics assign to different traditions and historical periods, the commentary will ignore such hypothetical source divisions. However, the tensions between the two narratives that elicit the source critical analysis will not be ignored but interpreted from a holistic final form perspective.

Plots are traditionally surveyed as they move from exposition to complication and on to resolution. Numerous individual stories in Genesis could be cited to illustrate that movement. For example, in the story of Cain and Abel, the initial announcement of the birth of the pair, their vocations and sacrifices (4.1-4a), is complicated by God's reaction to Cain's sacrifice and his reaction to God's disapproval (4.4b-8). The rest of the narrative moves towards a resolution (4.9-16), though a rather uneasy one it is to be sure. Such plotted movements are not confined to individual stories, but span whole blocks. Thus the initial announcement to Abraham concerning land, nationhood and blessing (12.1-3), initiates the plot that runs throughout the subsequent chapters in which complications threaten each of those elements. To cite just one of the most obvious examples, the potential sacrifice of Isaac (22.1-19), complicates the promise of nationhood in a most dramatic way. In these larger blocks, as in individual stories, the resolutions are rarely neat and absolute. They usually leave behind some unresolved issues for the reader to carry over into the next episode. For example, the statement concerning Joseph's resting in a coffin in Egypt, which brings the Genesis narrative to a conclusion (50.26), is a reminder that some complications have been resolved—the ancestral family have escaped famine and thus preserved their potential for nationhood, but they are not in the land promised to them. That is a complication that will require resolution beyond the confines of Genesis.

In giving attention to plot development, in places I emphasize *intertextuality*. Given the limitations of space placed upon contributors to this series I have chosen, on the whole, to read episodes in Genesis in light of other episodes in Genesis, rather than in light of the whole Hebrew Bible. Thus the term *intratextuality* might be more appropriate. Frequently, two or more passages with numerous explicit similarities cry out to be interpreted in the light of each other (e.g. the 'wife-sister' stories of chs. 12, 20 and 26). In others, connections are more allusive, but the resulting intratextual readings no less rewarding. For example, reading the Flood account (chs. 6-9) in light of Creation (chs. 1-3); Lot's offer of his daughters in Sodom (19.8) against Abraham's abandonment of his wife in Egypt (12.10-20); Jacob's wrestling at the Jabbok (32.22-32) as a reprise of his deception of Isaac (27.18-29), and so on. These and a host of other examples make of Genesis a sophisticated and complex literary work.

The intertextual reading I provide is predominantly a 'first-time' reading. That is to say, I provide intertextual readings retrospectively, looking back to previous episodes, rather than prospectively looking forward to passages not yet encountered at that point in the book. Thus, for example, in the wife-sister episodes, I provide only a cross-reference to the later episodes in commenting on 12.10-20. In ch. 20 I look back to ch. 12. I reserve comments that compare and contrast all three episodes until I come to ch. 26. As a consequence of this, intertextual readings occupy an increasingly prominent part as one works through the commentary from beginning to end.

To comment on the book as a first-time reader is not to claim, as one uncomprehending reviewer of my earlier volume seemed to think, that I have read Genesis only once. Of course not. But reading the book *as if* for the first time, is a helpful way to foreground its surprises, ironies, innovations and so on, and to enter into the plot with the characters, experiencing narrative developments through their eyes. Everyone of us has at some stage been a first-time reader of these narratives. So a first-time reading is an attempt to recapture the impact of that initial encounter.

For example, to read Gen. 22.1-19, the dramatic 'sacrifice' of Isaac, entirely as a second-time reader who knows the outcome from the beginning, divests the narrative of much of its tension. If we read already knowing that Isaac is rescued, then Abraham's 'test' generates no suspense, and as readers we do not enter into his angst. It is only by suspending our knowledge, entering into the story *as if* for the first time, and with the characters wondering what the outcome will be, that we can appreciate fully the literary genius of the story.

First-time reading, however, incorporates elements of second-time reading. First-time readers who read passage A and then proceed to passage B might well find in the latter all manner of elements that draw them back to the former as second-time, intertextual readers. To use the words of Rashkow,

The reader confers meaning retrospectively, earlier narrative elements retain a provisional status until the reader reaches another meaning based upon subsequent episodes... The plot develops and events become sequential rather than redundant, providing a grid through which antecedent scenes are re-examined, not to enhance an initial impression, but to qualify and complicate it (Rashkow 1992: 61-62).

Sometimes, when encountering a passage for the first time, I pause to consider how a first- and second-time reading might differ. On occasions, I also consider how a reading that incorporates perspectives from further afield in the Hebrew Bible might differ from, or add to, one confined to information divulged within Genesis (e.g. the connotations of the rivers mentioned in 2.10-14, or the role of Moabites and Ammonites in 19.30-38).

Plots require characters. More than anything else it is the depth of *characterization* that adds interest and verisimilitude to the narratives. In a book crammed full with a vast array of characters, not every individual can be developed fully. To use the terminology of Berlin (1983: 23), there are *flat characters* who contribute something to plot development, but do not emerge as individuals. They 'are built around a single quality or trait' (e.g. Onan, 38.8-10). There are *agents*, who act as functionaries to move the plot along to a new stage, but whose characterization is not developed (e.g. the cupbearer, 41.9-13). Much of the appeal of Genesis is produced, however, by numerous *fully fledged* characters who emerge from the text as believable and complex. The Genesis text constantly challenges us to readjust our assessment of a character. For example, when readers encounter Abraham who obeys God's command to leave his country (12.4), yet lies about his 'sister' (12.13; 20.2); believes God's amazing promise (15.6), but objects to God's plans (17.18); attempts to persuade the Lord to change his mind (18.22-33), though unquestioningly obeys the divine imperative to sacrifice his own son (22.1-10), they realize that here is a complex character indeed. And he is no exception, as I hope to demonstrate in the commentary.

The poetics of Hebrew narrative art has been extensively analysed in recent years. The reader who wishes to have a detailed treatment of this is referred to volumes such as Alter 1981; Berlin 1983; Bar-Efrat 1989 and Gunn and Fewell 1993. I provide a few selected examples here of

how Hebrew narrative style is employed in Genesis.

Wordplay abounds, as part of the narrative's strategy to underline the truly significant, or to encourage a reader to read one passage in the light of another. Sometimes this forms the basis for a motif such as 'ādām/'ā dāmā (man/ground), which occurs in the primeval history (e.g. 2.7; 3.17; 6.1). More often it is the narrative's way of emphasizing details in individual episodes, as with 'ārūmmīm/'ārūm (naked/crafty) in 2.25-3.1, or with ya'āqōb (Jacob), yē'ābēq ('wrestled') and yabbōq (Jabbok) in 32.22-32.

Multivalence is exploited at many points, alerting the reader to the possibility of more than one interpretation of a passage. So, for example, the fact that the root *gnb* can mean 'steal' or 'deceive' adds to a reading of Jacob's and Rachel's encounter with Laban (30.33; 31.19-20). When Potiphar's wife brandishes Joseph's 'garment' (*begeḏ*) as evidence of his attack on her, the fact that the root *bḡd* also conveys the concept of treachery or adultery, adds silent comment on her accusation (39.16-19).

Ambiguity is exploited in many a passage, emphasizing the subtlety and profundity of ostensibly simple narratives. Some passages exploit ambiguity by providing different interpretations of the same scene by narrator and characters, as in for example, Jacob's wrestling at the Jabbok (32.22-32). Ambiguity also appears on the larger conceptual scale, as when, for example, Abraham's dialogue with God and Lot's subsequent rescue from Sodom raise more than one possible view about the nature of human-divine relationships (18.16-19.38).

Irony is embedded throughout Genesis. For example, Hamor and Shechem's speech to the city elders, in which they assess Jacob's family as being 'friendly' (34.21), is seriously at odds with the information divulged by the narrator (34.13). Similarly, the news that Esau has prospered greatly (33.9; 36.6-7), can not be anything but ironic to a reader who has traced the complications caused by the dispensing of blessings throughout the narrative.

Repetition serves, among other things, to reinforce the important, remind the hearer of antecedent steps in the plot, or sometimes merely to delight in the aesthetics of hearing the cadences of familiar phrases. The first chapter of Genesis is an obvious example of repetition, with its hypnotic presentation of creation in six days. Days 1-6 have an almost identical structure. The seventh day contains none of those elements, and reveals another function of repetition. Climaxes are often underlined by departing from the repetitive patterns that precede them. Repetition can also heighten the reader's emotional involvement, as in 'your son, your only son' (22.2, 12, 16) and 'so the two of them walked on together' (22.6, 8), in the heart-stopping 'sacrifice' of Isaac.

The recurrence of concepts and/or vocabulary so as to form *motifs* aids integrative reading. The fact that the chaos motif occurs at the beginning and end of the primeval history (1.2, cf. 11.7-9), as well as in its heart (e.g. in the reversal of creation in the Flood), provides a perspective for enhancing a reading of chs. 1-11 as a whole. Similarly, the clothing motif in the story of Jacob's family alerts a reader to significant transitions likely to transpire (37.23; 38.14; 39.12; 41.14). While some motifs are confined to particular blocks, others span the entire book. One of the most pervasive is that of the reversal of primogeniture, that is the younger being preferred to the older (e.g. 4.1-16; 17.18-19; 25.23; 37.3-10).

Investigating the plot, intertextuality, character and aspects of Hebrew narrative style, however, is not an end in itself, nor can it be done without imagination. This simply provides a way into the text, a sounding of various possibilities for elucidating the narrative. Thus, I do not subject every passage to the same analysis. In some the emphasis will be on plot, in others on character, in others intertextuality will predominate, in others any one or more of these will be muted or non-existent.

I have deliberately left unanswered some questions raised by the text. The literary power of these narratives is sometimes best preserved by signalling the questions that they raise, rather than positing a neat solution. I hope that this will draw the reader into the Genesis text, rather than viewing it just through the prism of the commentary.

The significance of Genesis is based on more than the fact that it is the first book of the biblical canon. While every biblical book in one way or another touches on human life, Genesis addresses matters of human existence more fundamentally and vividly than most others. Issues such as the creation of the universe; the origins of life; what it means to be human; the nature of the human-divine relationship; God's destiny for people in general and for Israel in particular, and so on, are painted in graphic detail in the Genesis narratives, some of which rank with the greatest ever written.

A cursory reading of Genesis is enough to discover that the book is divided into two distinct blocks. The primeval history comprising 1.1-11.26, takes the reader from the creation of the heavens and earth to the erection of the tower of Babel. The ancestral history, 11.27-50.26, transports us from the call of Abraham in Haran to the death of Joseph in Egypt. The ancestral history itself is divided into sections dealing primarily with Abraham (11.27-25.18), Jacob (25.19-36.43) and Jacob's family, especially Joseph (37.1-50.26).

The literary style of the book is not static, and a general development

can be plotted as one moves through the book from beginning to end. The primeval history is more than a miscellaneous collection of diverse stories, but its parts are less interconnected than those of the rest of the book. There is certainly a sense of plot and forward momentum, and motifs function to hold the material together, but in a less sophisticated way than in the ancestral history. Characterization is also more sparse. Individuals are not allowed enough space in their narrative worlds to become as well-rounded as any of the major and many of the minor characters in the ancestral history. Even Noah, the major protagonist of chs. 6-9, remains a relatively flat character. What the narratives in this section do more vividly than any other, however, is set out the basic polarities of human existence—dependence/autonomy; blessing/curse; chaos/order, and so on.

The Abraham story is much more cohesive, with the initial call to Abraham (12.1-3) setting the stage for the rest of the narrative. Reading subsequent episodes in this section invariably causes the reader to ponder the issues raised in these initial verses. The characterization is also more complex, and not only of the major characters such as Abraham, Sarah and Lot; we are also provided with detailed cameos of minor characters such as Pharaoh, Hagar and Abimelech. An overarching plot is more discernible than in chs. 1-11, but the expectations of the characters, and with them those of the readers, are regularly raised and then disappointed.

The plot of the Jacob story is every bit as complex as that of Abraham, but its central character is more enigmatic. By the end of the Abraham story a reader will have recognized the complexity of Abraham, but will probably have been able to paint a cohesive portrait of the character. The character of Jacob, however, is not only more complex but also elusive, and certainly less sympathetically drawn. The complexity of Jacob's character is a reflection of the intricate interrelationships set up within the Jacob story by numerous allusions to episodes in both chs. 1-25 and within the Jacob story itself. They provide particularly rich opportunities for intertextual reading.

With the Joseph story, or more correctly the story of Jacob's family, we reach the most sustained, almost seamlessly constructed narrative block in Genesis. It is human activity, rather than the divine, that is at the centre of attention. God is present, though more often than not he is invoked by characters rather than being explicitly active. Yet, as if to underline the nature of the book, Joseph might be the most finely portrayed character in Genesis, but he is the most enigmatic of all, more so even than Jacob.

The brief outline above indicates something of the complexity,

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subtlety and interconnectedness of the book. Too often in the past Genesis has been treated as an amalgam of disparate sources cobbled together by dull redactors. Thankfully, that assessment is being increasingly challenged in contemporary scholarship. Viewed as a whole, and allowed to display its integrity as a cohesive composition, the book emerges as a coherent and well constructed literary work that rewards repeated investigation.

own space. We now move on to more mundane matters—relationships between neighbours and disputes over wells. As we shall see, however, other aspects of the divine promises are still in view.

Abimelech's approach to Abraham shows that he still has misgivings about him. He links two matters: God's obvious presence with Abraham, and a suspicion that Abraham might 'deal falsely' with him (21.22-23). This speech suggests that Abraham has not demonstrated beyond question the necessary correlation between ethical behaviour and relationship with Yahweh that Yahweh himself has demanded (see 17.1-2; 18.19).

The dispute over wells and the covenant that ensues recalls other issues that have been running through the Abraham story. Abimelech's speech reminds Abraham that he has 'resided as an alien' in Abimelech's land (21.23), and this point is repeated by the narrator at the end, (21.34). Thus while the progeny promise seems to have come to a final resolution, the promise of land is as far away now as ever. The dispute over wells and its resolution also illustrates how much stuttering progress is being made in the area of Abraham's becoming a blessing to the nations. His presence in foreign territory does not fill its inhabitants with unqualified happiness.

Genesis 22

The previous chapter had seemed to close the door decisively on any further developments in the progeny promise. Now, with God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, it is abruptly thrown back into chaos.

22.1-19

The bombshell of 22.1-2 returns the reader to the beginning of the Abraham story. God commands Abraham to 'Go!' (*lek-l^ekā*). This is the second time that God has used those exact words. In 12.1 he had commanded Abraham to 'Go!' (*lek-l^ekā*) from his country and family. That imperative initiated the entire enterprise that has sustained the reader's interest up to this point. Its repetition here seems to bring it to a shattering conclusion. The original command had been difficult enough. Despite ambiguity over *where* he was to go and *how* he was to become a great nation, it had clearly called on Abraham to cut himself off from his past, but had at least included the promise of a glorious future. But its repetition in 22.2, with its demand to slay Isaac, presents no ambiguity or uncertainty and demands that Abraham cut himself off from that future. All future hope rests on Isaac.

This command must rank as the least comprehensible in a series of divine amendments to the progeny promise. We have come to expect Abraham to put up stiff resistance to such innovations. His acceptance of God's revision of the plan in 15.6 is the exception. Subsequently, he has pleaded with God on behalf of Ishmael when he was eliminated from contention (17.18), and argued with God face to face over Sodom in order to preserve Lot (18.22-33). Thus, given the fact that God's present command would demolish the entire enterprise that started back in 12.1-3, it is nothing short of amazing that Abraham obeys unquestioningly, setting off for Moriah without a word of complaint. This is one of those rare instances in the narrative where Abraham does indeed rise to the divine challenge, 'walk before me, and be blameless' (17.1). The echo of 12.1-3 passes a comment on Abraham's exercise of faith. There at the outset Abraham responded with unquestioning faith (12.4), just as he does here. As we review Abraham's career with God, however, we realize that his life has been lived largely between these two extreme responses. The fact that ch. 22 returns to the beginning suggests that the story has now come full circle and will soon be at rest. But with so many previous misleading indicators of plot development we as first-time readers cannot be sure.

The action of ch. 22 occurs 'after these things' (22.1). This formula could well indicate more than simply the events of ch. 21, but with the echoes of ch. 12 imply *all* 'these things'—that is ch. 22 needs to be read with the entire Abraham story as its backdrop.

In a passage as terse as this, repetitions stand out all the more. Yahweh's command, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love' (22.2) would be needlessly verbose if it served only to convey information. Each phrase, however, is weighted to convey the poignancy of the act. Previously Abraham had thought he had a son on a number of occasions (see, e.g., 12.4-9; 16.7-16.). All have been dismissed; only Isaac is left. He is Abraham's *only* son because he is his *last* son. The moving intimacy between father and son as they walk to the place of execution is conveyed by another repetition, 'So the two of them walked on together' (22.6, 8).

A number of reminders of the expulsion of Ishmael impacts on our reading. The first is when 'Abraham rose early in the morning' (22.3), exactly as he had when he had disposed of his other 'son' (21.14). The correspondence is unsettling, carrying both negative and positive connotations. It reminds us that once again the life of a son is at risk (cf. 21.16), but raises the possibility that if Ishmael had been saved from death, might Isaac also? The narrative drops tantalizing clues that Abraham might be thinking along similar lines. He tells his young men that

he and Isaac will return to them after they have worshipped (22.5). Is this simply bravado, or does he recall Ishmael's rescue (assuming that he knows about it)? Similarly, Abraham's response to Isaac's question (22.7-8), makes us wonder what exactly might be going through his mind. The dialogue is an exquisite example of dramatic irony. Isaac's question regarding the whereabouts of the sacrificial lamb makes explicit that Isaac does not know what Abraham and the reader knows. But Abraham's response, 'God himself will provide the lamb', while possibly being only bluster, or at worst deception, might suggest that Abraham knows something that the reader does not know.

Once they have arrived at the appointed place, the pace of the narrative slows. More than three days journey have been compressed into 22.1-8, with room given mostly to broad description and significant dialogue. Now, in 22.9-10 each action is described in minute detail. We see Abraham going through each of the necessary preparations for the death of Isaac, delaying the inevitable to the very last moment. The normal sequence was to bind and kill the sacrifice before placing it on the altar (cf. Lev. 1.3-9, 10-13, etc.). But here, Isaac lies bound upon the altar, still alive. His dispatch can no longer be postponed. Abraham raises the knife.

The hopes that were raised earlier by the parallels with ch. 21 seem to have been vain. Yet as soon as the narrator mentions 'the angel of the Lord' (22.11), readers may guess what he will say before he opens his mouth. The expulsion and rescue of Ishmael was a dress rehearsal for the 'sacrifice' and deliverance of Isaac. Just as Hagar 'saw a well of water' (21.19) which saved Ishmael's life, so Abraham 'saw a ram' (22.13) and substituted it for his son.

The narrator prefaces these events with the words, 'God tested Abraham' (22.1). As readers we know that the command is a test. But without any indication to the contrary the test would seem to be whether Abraham will indeed kill Isaac. Thus the reader's anxiety level is raised, especially when Abraham sets off giving every indication that that is precisely what he will do. But why should God want to test Abraham? While it is true that many previous incidents could be labelled 'tests' (e.g. the initial call in 12.1-3), this is the only one explicitly labelled as such, so it must have some particular significance. The answer to this question is provided by the angel's words in 22.12, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; *for now I know that you fear God*, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me'. In other words the incident is a test to discover whether Abraham is committed to Yahweh. Before Abraham stood with dagger raised atop Mt Moriah, Yahweh obviously queried Abraham's loyalty. And even a

cursory review of preceding episodes reveals how justified that doubt was. God's command is an absolute test of faith. Will Abraham obey God regardless of the consequences? The curious passivity of Isaac at the 'sacrifice' and its sequel underlines that this is a test of *Abraham's* faith in Yahweh, not of Isaac's obedience or compliance to his father. Once placed on the altar, Isaac takes no part in the action at all. Isaac's possible responses or protests are of no importance. Abraham returns to his young men; what Isaac does we are left to guess at. The focus throughout is on Abraham.

I have had occasion to mention several times the crucial nature of the statement in 17.1-2, which links the making of the covenant between God and Abraham dependent upon Abraham's 'walking before' God and being 'blameless'. Abraham's subsequent behaviour was anything but blameless—for example, questioning God's removal of Ishmael, passing off Sarah as his sister and so on. Chapter 22 brings us to the crisis—Abraham's last chance to demonstrate whether he is capable of fearing and presenting himself 'blameless'. Because Abraham does obey unquestioningly, then the covenant promises can be ratified: 'Because you have done this ... I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven ...' (22.16b-17a; see Alexander 1983: 21).

This chapter started with an echo of 12.1-3. The paradox contained in that original command is confirmed and expanded here. When God first spoke, Abraham had to give up his present land in order to be shown the land of promise; he had to give up his current family in order to become the father of a great nation. On Mt Moriah, he had to be willing to give up his only son in order to become the father of a multitude.

22.20-24

The positioning at this point of the news concerning the family of Abraham's brother is significant. Over the years Abraham has struggled to perceive the exact focus of the progeny promise. Its fulfilment has teetered on a knife-edge as several individuals have recommended themselves as the avenue of fulfilment (see, e.g., 12.4-9; 17.15-27). And the true son of promise has just escaped death by a whisker. Abraham now hears news that his brother Nahor has been reproducing at an amazing rate—12 sons by his wife and a concubine, plus untold numbers of daughters. The picture is one of domestic bliss in Haran. Nahor has not had to go through the torture of Abraham's family life, with its infertility, intrigues and divine amendments. But then again, through none of his sons will all the nations of the earth be blessed.