

## WE HAVE FOUND WATER: PATRIARCHAL PARADIGMS FOR CROSS-CULTURAL MISSION<sup>1</sup>

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In 1984 I participated in a task force, sponsored by the International Mercy Corps, which looked at the plight of the Palestinians in the territories occupied by Israel after the war of June, 1967. One of the resource people who helped us understand the situation was Rabbi Yehezkel Landau, a representative of *Oz va Shalom*, a Jewish organization pushing for peaceful and just treatment of the Arabs within Israel.

Rabbi Landau suggested that there is more than one paradigm or model in the Hebrew Bible for relating to other inhabitants of the land God had promised Israel. In addition to the Joshua model of conquest and dominance, there is what he called the patriarchal model, exemplified by Abraham, a model of patient and peaceful coexistence. Immediately, I felt the force of the paradigm, not only as a model for Israeli-Palestinian relations, but also as a model for any cross-cultural venture. After all, missionaries are usually aliens and sojourners in the lands which host them (Genesis 23:4). This essay explores the relevance for cross-cultural communication and witness of four narratives in Genesis: the separation of Abram<sup>2</sup> and Lot (13:1-18); the encounter of Abraham and Melchizedek (14:13-24); Abraham's negotiation with the Hittites for the Cave of Machpelah (23:1-20); and the struggle between Isaac and the herdsmen of Gerar over water (26:12-33).

Each narrative is studied inductively in order to discern the intent of its final form in the canon of scripture authoritative for the church. I draw conclusions from the text as scripture given "to every generation of believers."<sup>3</sup>

The essay will argue that the presentation of Abraham and Isaac as models for how to relate to the people of the land of Canaan peacefully, patiently, and constructively is an explicit intention of the narratives. In spite of the fact that God has given them the land

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is essentially the same one published under the same title in the *Asbury Theological Journal*, Vol. 42 No. 2 1987, 21-44. Its 80 notes have been reduced to 29, many reduced in size.

<sup>2</sup> In this essay I am using Abraham throughout, except as required by quoted material.

<sup>3</sup> Gerald T. Sheppard in "Canon Criticism: the Proposal of Brevard Childs and an Assessment for Evangelical Hermeneutics," *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 4 (1974): 3-17.

(13:14-17; 26:3- 4), and in spite of the fact that Abraham is strong enough to take it for himself (14:1-12), Abraham shows an amazing freedom to let others choose (13:8-13) and to make contact with the spiritual traditions of the people of Canaan (14:17-23). Abraham shows a peace-loving acceptance of the cultural forms of the people of the land (23:1-20). Isaac also, in a way reminiscent of his father's irenic persistence in digging wells, wins his detractors' respect (26:12-33). The promise to Abraham and Isaac insures that God will give them land and progeny, but the assurance that it is God's promise enables them in their best moments to rest on that promise and proceed peacefully and persistently to accept the realities of their lives as aliens among the people of the land.

I have illustrated a suggested application of each of the patriarchal models to an important issue in the global mission of the Church: Abraham's generosity to Lot suggests a model for *ecumenical cooperation*; the patriarch's attribution of the name of a Canaanite deity to the Lord of Israel models *an appropriate theological contextualization*; his negotiations with the Hittites for a place to bury his wife models *an acceptance of indigenous practices*; and Isaac's response to the injustice and rejection of Abimelech provides a model for *peaceful and patient response to resistance and rejection*.

Since all four narratives involve in one form or another the triumph of peaceful persistence in the face of events which could precipitate violent rejection, the last model epitomizes all relations with the people of the land. And thus, the delayed announcement of Isaac's persistent shepherds symbolizes the ultimate victory of all paradigms of peace: "We have found water!" (26:32)

### Model 1: Coping With Choices over Territory

When the pressures of their growing wealth caused Abraham's herdsmen and Lot's herdsmen to quarrel over the grazing territory they shared, Abraham decided to divide the land, giving Lot first choice, an opportunity that Lot seized without hesitation: "And Lot . . . saw that the Jordan valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord. . . . So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan valley." This surprising choice left for Abraham the land of Canaan (13:10-12).

Particularly where mission agencies proliferate in a common land, mission across cultures involves choices about territory. To cope with the problem, delegates at mission

conferences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries opted for ecumenical cooperation, developing the concept of *comity*. According to this procedure, territory shared by mission agencies would be divided, giving a sphere of influence to each agency. For most mission entities, according to mission historian Stephen Neill, the concept worked well, but some agencies and individuals abused, circumvented or ignored the practice.<sup>4</sup> The story of the separation of Abraham and Lot provides contemporary mission organizations with a model for ecumenical cooperation in coping with choices about territory.

Three important movements make up the plot of the story: 1) Abraham offers his kinsman, Lot, first choice in a division of the land of Canaan (13:8-9); 2) Lot, ignoring the parameters of choice which Abraham offers, opts out of the land of promise in response to the lure of a fertile valley exposed to cities of sin (vv. 10-11); and 3) Abraham receives the whole of the land of Canaan and a promise of progeny as numerous as the dust of the earth (vv. 11-18).

The opening verses of the passage suggest prosperity. When Abraham and Lot return from Egypt to the land of promise, Abraham is very rich and Lot, his kinsman, also “had flocks and herds and tents” (13:1-5). This prosperity is evidence of the blessing referred to in the promise that forms a recurrent theme in the saga of Abraham and his descendents:

Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth will bless themselves (12:1-3).

In addition to evidence of divine blessing, the journey chronicled in the early verses of the passage represents a restoration and renewal of the patriarch’s involvement in the Land of Promise. Two phrases in 13:3-4 are parallel in structure: “*to the place where* his tent had been *at the beginning*” (3b); and “*to the place where* he had made an altar *at the first*” (4a). The parallel structure calls attention to the two phrases and to their parallel components, *place* and *beginning*. They speak of restoration and fulfillment, of homeland and worship.

But in spite of the potential salutary effects of return and restoration, and because of

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<sup>4</sup> *A History of Christian Missions* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1964).

their mutual prosperity, the kinsmen can no longer “dwell together” (13:6a and 6b).

Abraham must divide the land with Lot (v. 8). The choice which Abraham offers Lot is clear from the passage itself. Abraham and Lot are situated at “the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai,” looking out over the land (v. 3). References to the land abound in this brief chapter. And, as we shall see below, it is important for the reader to know that “the land” which is to be divided between Abraham and Lot is the Land of Canaan.

We can discern from the story itself how Abraham intended to divide the land. He says, “If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left” (v. 9). Orientation eastward is assumed in Semitic directions, west being behind one’s back or toward the sea, as in “seawards” (v. 14). From this orientation one’s right hand indicates the south and one’s left hand the north. Abraham says to Lot, “Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand (north), then I will go to the right (south); or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left”(v. 9). In other words, Abraham has decided to divide the land into north and south, giving his nephew, Lot, first choice as to whether he wanted northern Canaan with the Bethel-Ai axis as southern boundary, or southern Canaan with that axis as northern boundary. The irony of the story arises when Lot makes his choice.

*He ignores the Promised Land altogether*, opting for the verdant Jordan valley, *leaving the whole of Canaan to Abraham*. Lot accepts Abraham’s offer to choose, ignoring the parameters of choice. The story does not suggest at all that Lot took the best land leaving Abraham with the dry and unfertile remainder. Rather, the narrator makes clear that Lot has opted for a paradise infected with temptation. To be sure, he chose the most luxurious part of the area: “And Lot lifted up his eyes and saw that the Jordan valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord. . .” (v. 10). But the concentric structure of the narrative presentation of Lot’s choice is instructive:

A And Lot lifted up his eyes  
   B and saw the whole of the Jordan valley  
     C that it was everywhere well watered  
       X before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah  
     C' like the garden of the Lord  
   B' like the land of Egypt  
 A' in the direction of Zoar (v. 10).<sup>5</sup>

In the middle of the description of this well-watered Garden of Eden, stands a reminder of the fate of its cities. Even the reference to the land of Egypt suggests to Hebrew readers and listeners both a well-watered valley and a land of slavery. The structure of verse 12 makes clear that the choice of Lot is to be contrasted with that of Abraham, as the land of Canaan is contrasted with the cities of the Jordan valley: “Abram dwelt in the land of Canaan, while Lot dwelt among the *cities* of the valley” (v. 12). Verse 13 makes explicit what the structure of verse 10 foreshadows: “Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord.” Abraham never offered Lot the verdant valley over against the arid hill country; he offered to share with him the land of Canaan. In his departure to dwell among the more promising cities of the valley, Lot opted out of the Promised Land!

Abraham’s effort to end strife by dividing the land and his generosity in giving his kinsman the first choice appear thwarted by Lot’s response to the lure of “the well watered garden of the Lord” and blatant disregard for Abraham’s terms of choice. Nevertheless, God’s plans are not thwarted and God’s promises are renewed. Just as the chapter begins in hope of restoration and renewal, an act of settlement and an act of worship (v. 1-4), so the chapter ends with the restoration of the promise, renewal of the gift of the land, settlement in it and an act of worship (vv. 14-18).

Finally, through the parallels in and around the two passages of direct address, Abraham’s offering of choice to Lot (vv. 8-9) and the Lord’s offering Abraham the Land of Canaan (vv. 14-17), the story suggests that in his generous treatment of Lot Abraham acts in the way the Lord would act. He offers Lot half the land, while the Lord promises Abraham the whole land. Abraham says, “Is not the whole land before you?” (v. 9) and the Lord says, “For all the land which you see I will give to you. . .” (v. 15). The stress on

the whole land is suggested in both passages by specifying of directions, in the first by the directions left and right, and in the second by the directions, “toward the north,” “toward the south,” “toward the east,” and “toward the west.”

In fact, the whole of verses 14 through 18 have striking parallels in verses 10 through 13. The phrase, “And Lot lifted up his eyes and saw the whole Jordan valley,” in verse 10 is paralleled by the divine command in verse 14, “Lift up your eyes and see . . . all the land. . . .” The initiative taken by Lot (v. 11) in response to Abraham’s offer of choice is contrasted with God’s imperative to Abraham, “Arise, walk. . .” (v. 17). The promise of future progeny in the land (vv. 15, 16) parallels the reminder of the destruction of the cities of the valley (v. 10; see also v. 13). Just as Lot “chose for himself all the Jordan valley and . . . journeyed east (v. 11),” so the Lord told Abraham, “Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you” (v. 17). The last clause of verse 12 and verse 13 are parallel to verse 18: “and [Lot] moved his tent as far as Sodom; and the men of Sodom are evil and sinners to the Lord—bad ones” (vv. 12-13);<sup>6</sup> “So Abraham moved his tent, and came and dwelt by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron; and there he built an altar to the Lord” (v. 18). These parallels suggest that the storyteller intends to point out that Abraham, in acting like his Lord, provides a model of self-giving for the people of Israel, who are to be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). And, since Abraham is clearly a New Testament model as well, this passage becomes paradigmatic for “every generation of believers.”

The freedom to let others choose is a vulnerable freedom. But such generosity mimes God’s own generosity and trusts ultimately in divine promise—even when plans run amuck. Inheriting promises entails, among other things, granting freedom and responding freely.

As tensions resulted from the blessing of God in the lives of Abraham and Lot, so tensions have resulted from the many mission agencies that have begun work in a common territory. For example, in the mid-nineteenth century, when English Bishop G. A. Selwyn founded the Melanesian Mission in the Southwest Pacific, he was in full agreement with the concept of missionary comity. One of his founding principles was

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<sup>5</sup> I have departed from the RSV translation here in order to reveal more accurately the structure of the Hebrew. Is there a suggestion in these verses that, like the Garden of Eden, an earthly paradise is always a place of temptation?

“never interfere with any Christianization already undertaken by any religious body or sect whatsoever.” This the Anglican Melanesian Mission practiced during the first half century of relatively slow growth in their territory. But during the period Darrell L. Whiteman has called the era of missionary penetration (1900-1942), when the Mission was experiencing gratifying growth, the “proselyting monopoly” of the Mission was suddenly eclipsed by the influx of competing mission groups. Most of the newcomers were completely unencumbered by any principle of comity and the Melanesian Mission<sup>7</sup> was forced to compete on all fronts. Denominationalism provided a convenient structure to perpetuate indigenous quarrels and traditional divisions in Melanesian society. One mission even built blatantly competitive schools on either side of those established by the Melanesian Mission. Although the Melanesian Mission decided it had to enter into competition with competing missions, in fact it continued to concentrate almost exclusively on the territories where it had always worked.

Nevertheless, under the leadership of a variety of bishops and blessed by the gracious emergence of an indigenous evangelistic brotherhood, the Melanesian Mission contributed significantly to the emergence of a truly Melanesian Christian community. Their choices about territory were ignored or circumvented by others who, for reasons of their own—expanding their own territory or making every territory unsafe for heresy—took advantage of the system or circumvented it altogether. The Melanesian Mission’s effort to share territory amounted to a paradigm of grace, contributing to the emergence of an increasingly indigenous Christian community among the people with whom they have born witness.<sup>8</sup> A part of the reason may lie in their participation in an Abrahamic paradigm of peace.

This Abrahamic model suggests that to ignore the parameters of choice for reasons of self-indulgence courts disaster and can remove one from participation in the ongoing purposes of God. But the paradigm also suggests that the blessing of God and a renewal of the assurance of His promises arises out of a situation where his own kind of generosity is exercised. Faithfulness is maintained even in the face of a surprising lack of

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<sup>6</sup> The translation here is my own.

<sup>7</sup> Darrell L. Whiteman, *Melanesians and Missionaries* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1983), pp. 101 and 173-75.

<sup>8</sup> Whiteman, *Melanesians*, pp. 194-98.

responsibility.

## Model 2: Adjusting to Indigenous Theologies:

According to Mircea Eliade, the “almost universal belief in a celestial divine being, who created the universe and guarantees the fecundity of the earth” is “quite beyond doubt.”<sup>9</sup> Abraham’s encounter with Melchizedek, king of Salem (14:17-24), suggests that the belief of a people outside the biblical tradition in a creator God may be an important point for theological contextualization.

Genesis 14 begins like an ancient Near Eastern chronicle, “In the days of Amraphel king of Shinar. . .” (v.1). Verses 1 through 11 report the great successes of Chedorlaomer and the three kings associated with him in putting down rebellion (vv. 4-7) and defeating the kings of the five city states in the Valley of Siddim (vv. 8-11). The reader of the chronicle is made privy to the awesome power of the four rulers from afar as they subdue a litany of peoples and humiliate the five kings from Sodom to Zoar. Some of them fall clumsily into bitumen pits and others flee chaotically into the hills. In fact, the chronicle appears to have little to do with the protagonists of Genesis until, rather suddenly, Lot, “the son of Abram’s brother,” turns up among the booty which is carried off by the escaping northern hosts.

In response, Abraham combines his forces, including some 318 choice and trusted warriors, and chases the escaping victors, routs the mighty kings at Hobah, north of Damascus, and returns with spoils of war—including his liberated kinsman, Lot.

After his return, Abraham is received warmly by the king of Sodom, priest of El Elyon, “God Most High.” The king, Melchizedek, blesses the victorious patriarch, serving bread and wine, in the name of the God Melchizedek serves. Abraham responds by giving the king a tenth of all the spoils of war, a generous gesture which elicits a disclaimer from the king of Sodom who would be content with merely the return of his citizens. But Abraham will take nothing that belongs to the king lest it be noised about that he has become wealthy at Melchizedek’s expense. Abraham swears he will take only what has already been consumed and a share for the men who fought with him (vv. 17-24). Here again we have the great and gracious patriarch, this time defeating enemies of the land of Canaan and dealing with its people in magnanimity and confidence.

But an interesting detail of the narrative can hardly escape its reader: when Abraham swears by the Lord, he also swears by the God served by Melchizedek, “El Elyon, maker of heaven and earth” (vv. 19 and 22).

Thus, the ancient patriarch sees a correlation between the Canaanite deity, El Elyon and YHWH, the God of Israel. Walter Brueggemann treats this passage as evidence for scripture’s daring to claim that the God who calls Abraham and gives Isaac is indeed the God worshiped in Canaan as the God of fertility even though the Canaanites did not know the true name of the God whom they worshiped as “God Most High”; but it was the liberated Israelites who knew that God’s true name.<sup>10</sup>

Evidence from ethnology and the cross-cultural study of religion supports the biblical conviction that people are “created in the image of God” (Genesis 1:26-27) and that “God has put something in the created order” to attract all people to the divine “handiwork” (Psalms 19:1).<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the kind of theological contextualization that emerges in this patriarchal paradigm ought to be possible among most people groups. The experience of Vincent Donovan with the Masai of East Africa offers a contemporary example of adjustment to, and transformation of, an indigenous theology.

When Donovan decided to take the Gospel message unadorned with other gifts and services directly to the proud Masai of East Africa, he found that in order to communicate he had to listen and learn. One thing he learned was that the Masai could talk about a Supreme Being. “For the Masai,” he discovered, “there is only one God, Engai, but Engai goes by many names.”<sup>12</sup> Two of the many convictions they have about this High God are that the deity dwells beyond the pale blue dome of sky, beyond its deepest patches of blue; and that “he<sup>13</sup> loved rich people more than poor people, healthy people more than sick, . . . loved the Masai more than all the other tribes, loved them fiercely, jealously,

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<sup>9</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religions*. Trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York, NY: World, 1970), p. 38.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 136.

<sup>11</sup> Henri Maurier, *The Other Covenant: A Theology of Paganism*. Trans. Charles McGrath (New York, NY: Newman, 1968), p. 213.

<sup>12</sup> Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*. Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition (Mayknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003 ), p. 33.

<sup>13</sup> The Masai hold that Engai is neither male nor female; sometimes they use female terms for Engai and sometimes male terms (*Christianity Rediscovered*, 33).

exclusively.”<sup>14</sup> Engai was both far beyond the earth and its limitations and “trapped” as the tribal god of the Masai. While the American Donovan had to admit that *his* people had also treated the High God as their own, he invited the Masai to join him in seeking out the High God, freeing the High God from the Masai, freeing the Masai to love all people.

In the process, the Masai learned also that Engai was not only as high as they thought, and less uniquely their own God than they thought, but also much more intimately involved with them than they had known. A Masai elder who had become the priest’s teacher put it this way:

You told us of the High God, how we must search for him, even leave our land and our people to find him. But we have not done this. We have not left our land. We have not searched for him. He has searched for us. He has searched *us* out and found us. All the time we think we are the lion. In the end, the lion is God.<sup>15</sup>

Not every person or community to whom the cross-cultural witness goes will have a concept of God ready-made for the communication of the Gospel, but many will. We must dare to find that point of contact for communication; for the Most High God who made the heavens and the earth is YHWH, the LORD.

### Model 3: Conforming to Local Custom in the Crises of Life

Death strikes close to home and can be a better bridge than even an indigenous theology. There is very little that unites people more closely than an experience of suffering as intense as bereavement. The acceptance of indigenous practices at such a time helps the missionary identify with the indigenous people. The burial of Sarah in the Cave of Machpelah represents a commitment in permanence to the people of the land at a time of human vulnerability and solidarity (23:1-20). Furthermore, it demonstrates the accommodation of the patriarch to the cultural traditions of the Hittites among whom Abraham lived as an alien and pilgrim. The incident of Abraham’s patient and humble negotiations for a burial site for Sarah provides a model for identification with “the people of the land” (vv. 7, 12, 13).

Sarah captures the attention of the reader at the outset of the chapter. Through the presentation of her age, the repetition of the phrase “years of the life of Sarah,” the place

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<sup>14</sup> *Christianity Rediscovered*, 33.

<sup>15</sup> *Christianity Rediscovered*, p. 48.

of her burial, and the completion of her husband's full rites of mourning, the reader senses the significance of the patriarch's loss and its pain. The complete absence of Sarah's name in the long negotiation with the Hittites in favor of frequent references to Abraham's "dead," preserves the fragile protection against unbearable agony which such institutions effect. Sarah's name emerges again in verse 19 where her actual burial functions with the first two verses as something like bookends for the story of her burial.

The narrative of negotiation abounds with evidence of Abraham's close adherence to custom in this most intense of life's crises. The repetition of certain features of the narrative provides clues to the structure of the negotiation. First of all, the parallels and contrasts of the four verses which begin with, "And he arose" (*wayyāqôm*) offer a hint that we are dealing with stages of Abraham's negotiation with the Hittites (vv. 3, 7, 17, 20). Verse 7 adds "and he bowed" to its "And he arose"; it also adds "people of the land" to its mention of the Hittites. The phrase "and he said" also occurs in both verses 3 and 7.

In fact, verses 3-6, and 7-9 do represent two stages of the negotiation. The first stage involves merely the privilege of burying Sarah on land belonging to the Hittites. The second involves the more delicate task of obtaining the specific cave which Abraham wants from its owner, Ephron, the Hittite. Verse 12 also features the phrase used in verse 7, "and he bowed." And the phrase used in both verses 3 and 7, "and he said," occurs at the outset of verse 13. These parallels signal another stage in the negotiations (in spite of the omission of "and he stood"). Verses 12-16 treat the coming to terms and the paying of the full price for Ephron's property. Verse 17 also begins with the verb *wayyāqôm* heretofore translated "he arose," but in this context clearly does not mean "Abraham arose and. . ." Rather it should be translated, "So *it happened* that the field went over to Abraham. . ." According to Gene M. Tucker, the expression amounts to "a transfer clause in an actual contract."<sup>16</sup> The same phrase with the same meaning occurs at the beginning of verse 20 as well. See below. Here the verb signifies the final stage of the transaction, the ratification of the contract in the presence of the Hittites and all the people who "enter the gate of the city," that is the town council (vv. 17-18).

Words from the Hebrew root letters, *Gimel-Beth-Resh*: noun, "burying place," and verb, "to bury," occur abundantly in this chapter: vv. 4, 6, 8, 9, 11, 13, 15, 19, 20. All

parties to the negotiation see this as significant. The constant reminder of the purpose for the negotiation heightens its importance and solemnity and deepens the potential identification with the people of the land. It also contributes to the irony and force of the event since it increases awareness of the vulnerability of Abraham and thus the impact of the price he eventually agrees to pay for the burial ground.

Judging by its repetition and use, another prominent word in the negotiations, “give” contributes to the almost humorous irony of the transactions (vv. 4, 9 (2x), 11 (3x), 13). In the ritualized generosity of this formal transaction, “give” serves as a euphemism for sell and acquire. The word “take,” disguised in translation as “accept,” occurs but once. But it turns out to be the order of the day because it occurs when Abraham urges Ephron to take the money for the land (v. 13). Ephron, who finally offers a definite price for the land, culminates this ritualized generosity by acting as though to do so is a mere trifle: “My Lord, listen to me! A piece of land priced at 400 shekels—what is that between you and me?” (v. 15). A reader with the requisite cultural background can hear Abraham answering—to himself of course, “A lot!” Four hundred shekels for a piece of land like Ephron’s is exorbitant. Jeremiah paid 17 shekels for a field (Jeremiah 32:7) and the King, Omri, paid 6,000 shekels for the whole area on which Samaria was to stand (1 Kings 16:24). The final phrase of Ephron’s statement makes it look as though his willingness to sell is a function of the high significance and urgency of Abraham’s need, “Now bury your dead” (v. 15).<sup>17</sup>

In light of the intricacies and artifice of the negotiations, it is also startling that Abraham accepts the price suggested by Ephron without hesitation of any kind. In fact, this is just one of several indications in the passage that Abraham is going overboard to court the cooperation of the Hittites in general whom he begs to intercede for him with Ephron. He refers to himself at the outset as “a stranger and a sojourner among you” (v. 4), a category of persons who, in contrast to the “natives” or “the local people” (vv. 7, 12 and 13), apparently did not have the right to acquire property by means of a standard transaction,<sup>18</sup> or at least did not have any land to use for the burial of their dead. Abraham

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<sup>16</sup> Gene R. Tucker, “The Legal Background of Genesis 23,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 (1966: 77-84), p. 83.

<sup>17</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A commentary*. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1985), p. 375.

<sup>18</sup> Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, p. 373.

appeals to the circumstances surrounding his request, the burial of his dead, an appeal likely to influence the Hittites, and an appeal to which they frequently refer as well. Furthermore, the patriarch bows to the people of the land at two important points in the negotiations out of thanks, respect and/or adherence to custom (vv. 7, 12). Finally, the narrator is elaborate in noting that, “Abraham agreed with Ephron; and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver which he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants” (v. 16).

Finally, verses 19 and 20 close out the story. Verse 19 forms with the first two verses of chapter 23 a set of bookends for the account; it closes the narrative *as a story of the burial of Sarah*. But verse 20, a kind of repetition of verses 17-19, closes the story again. As mentioned above, the verse begins with another *wayyāqôm*: “And so it happened,” the very same verbal phrase also translated in this same chapter “and he arose.” “And so it happened that the field and the cave which is in it went to Abraham for a place of burial from the Hittites” (my translation). In literal terms, the chapter ends with the word, “the Hittites.” The position of “the Hittites” (*B<sup>c</sup>nēy-Ĥēth*), as the very last two words of the narrative, stresses precisely this ethnic community. Just as verse 19 closes the story as a narrative about the death and burial of Sarah, so verse 20 closes the narrative as a record of *Abraham’s negotiation with the Hittites*.

Like Abraham’s interaction with the king of Sodom (14:17-24), his deliberations with the Hittites can be treated as a “Covenant Negotiation,” a type of story, according to Livingston, “concerned with relationships between ethnic groups, which may be made harmonious if a covenant can be made between them.”<sup>19</sup> Clearly, the story intends to provide a model for God’s people who, by creative conformity to custom at a time of vulnerability and crisis, can effect harmonious relations with the people of the land.

Dr. George Hartley, a Methodist medical missionary to Liberia, discovered this patriarchal paradigm in the crucible of grief. According to an African tale polished by repetition, Hartley resided on a hill in a bungalow of his own with his wife and one small son. He was well removed from the village both physically, culturally and spiritually, for none of the villagers seemed at all interested in the message of salvation. One very sad

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<sup>19</sup> G. Herbert Livingstone, *The Pentateuch in its Cultural Environment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1974) pp. 241-260; other such negotiations in the Pentateuch are listed on page 248.

day the young couple's only child died of malaria. The missionary went to the village carpenter to have a small coffin made for the child's body. After the coffin was ready the carpenter accompanied the missionary and his wife with the remains of their son to the burial spot outside the village near their house. At the outset, neither parent showed any emotion for the wife had already spent herself in weeping and the husband had not yet begun to cry. Their stoical demeanor seemed rather peculiar to the African whose own mourning traditions allowed deep and intense emotional expressions of grief.

When the missionary began to read the prayer book slowly in the performance of his duties at his son's grave, it seemed perfunctory to the African carpenter. Then suddenly, in the midst of the verses of scripture he was reading, the missionary collapsed over the coffin of his child in agonizing, tearful convulsions of grief. While the bereaved father wept out of control, the African carpenter ran back to his village proclaiming to everyone who would listen, "White men also cry!" "White men also cry!"

Many villagers accompanied the carpenter back to the grave where the father, slumped over the remains of his son, still sobbed with grief. But now the Africans joined the white couple in the mourning, blending the sound of their own funeral drums and dancing with those of the sobbing father. In the aftermath of this human crisis, the village people became interested in the Gospel of Christ and a church was formed among them.

Through negotiations congruent with the customs of the Hittites, Abraham obtained a place to bury the wife he grieved. In doing so, he established himself in the land. Dr. Hartley's grief, with the help of the carpenter, brought the African villagers and their mourning customs to Hartley, who, established in the land as a fellow human sufferer, was able to bring the church of Jesus Christ to the African village.<sup>20</sup>

#### Model 4: Persistence and Peace-making in the Face of Injustice and Rejection

In a creative and perceptive essay on the future of the Christian world mission in Asia, Kosuke Koyama suggests that the West has been "both *gun* (wounding) and *ointment* (healing) for the East."<sup>21</sup> When Alfonso de Albuquerque began his assault on the fortress of Malacca, now in Malaysia, on behalf of the Portuguese spice trade, he

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<sup>20</sup> I am indebted to my former colleague, Dr. Timothy Kiogora, for this story.

<sup>21</sup> Kosuke Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology* (London, UK: SCM Press, 1974), Ch. 4: "Gun and Ointment," pp. 47-61.

encouraged his men with the assurance that the Lord was blinding the judgment and hardening the heart of the King of Malacca, an obvious reference to the liberation of Israel and the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. But Koyama argues that it was Alfonso's heart that was hardened in two ways. The guns he carried on his fleet symbolized his heart hardened by greed and hatred for Muslims, and the cross perched high above his fleet symbolized a further hardening that resulted from using an inappropriate biblical paradigm to justify his conquest (AD 1511). How do we know which model to choose? Why not the Joshua model of conquest? Why the peace and patience of Abraham? We choose with Koyama on the basis of the "crucified mind." We choose out of the paradigm of the Anointed One who was wounded: "The missionary ointment itself, then, can be fragrant only in so far as the fragrance of Christ is in it. . . ." <sup>22</sup> That very fragrance graces our final model.

In Genesis 26:1-33 we find Abraham's son Isaac rejected by Abimelech, the king of the Philistines, who commands him, "Go away from us" (v. 16). After being unjustly forced away from at least two wells which they had dug themselves, Isaac's entourage persisted in opening yet another old well. It paid off. That last well, to be named Rehoboth, was not disputed by the herdsmen of Gerar; God had finally given them space to live. In the end, the two princes made peace at the invitation of Abimelech (vv. 28-31), the dryness of their alienation having been watered by the kindness of Isaac (v. 30). The final phrase of the episode becomes both its theme statement and an epigram for all the models we have examined: "We have found water!" (v. 32). Patient, persistent response can turn what looks like rejection into blessing.

In digging wells tenaciously, Isaac is living out again the patient persistence of his father, Abraham, who had already made a covenant with Abimelech over disputed water rights at Beersheba (21:22-34). Both parallel narratives exhibit recognition of prosperity, conflict over water, and covenant process leading to peace.

In fact there is additional evidence in chapter 26 that the narrator intends to remind the reader of Abraham while attending to Isaac. In a theophany, God promises Isaac what he has promised Abraham before him (vv. 1-5). The rationale for the blessing connects Isaac with Abraham: "because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my

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<sup>22</sup> Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, pp. 57 and 209-224.

commandments, my statutes, and my laws” (v.5). In addition, both patriarchs try to pass their beautiful wives off as their sisters under threat of their lives (vv. 6-11; 12:10-16; 20:1-7). Even the order of events is similar although it is interrupted by additional material: in the case of Abraham, a promise of blessing (vv. 1-5; 17:1-21); a stratagem of protection (vv. 6-11; 20:1-7); and a covenant of peace (vv. 12-33; 21:22-34). Finally, in this chapter—virtually the only material in the Torah about Isaac—Abraham is mentioned eight times (vv. 1, 3, 5, 15, 18, 18, 24, 24), including specific references to Abraham’s wells (vv. 15, 18). There is a sense in which this chapter about Isaac is a part of the story of Abraham.

Although he is forced into the land of Gerar by famine, a land which the Lord promises to him (vv.1, 2), Isaac prospers to the extent that the Philistines become jealous, causing Abimelech to reject him: “Go away from us; for you are much mightier than we” (vv. 12-16). Whatever else those marching orders may have meant they clearly testify to the prosperity that attends Isaac under the blessing of the Lord. In contrast with his father’s fate, when Isaac’s stratagem to protect himself by claiming that his wife is his sister is found out, Abimelech grants him the protection that enables him to prosper among the Philistines. Brueggemann suggests that a comparison of these “type stories” point to the blessing of wealth which Isaac enjoys.

The use of the root *Gîmel-Dālet-Lāmed* (carrying the idea of “large,” “great”) three times in verse 13 suggests that the narrator intends to focus on the intensity of Isaac’s wealth: “The Lord blessed him, and the man became rich [literally ‘great’] and gained more [‘greater’] and more [‘greater’] until he became very wealthy [‘very great’]” (vv. 12-13).

Critics have noted that the description of Isaac’s wealth is hardly that of a small cattle nomad. But it appears that the purpose of the narrative is not to present a consistent image of the small cattle nomad but to show how men of power and wealth can still do what is necessary to get along with others in the same land. Here we get at the meaning of the scripture for “every generation of believers.” Just as Abraham’s victory over the four kings who carried Lot off (14:1-11) contributes to the reader’s appreciation of his voluntary submission to the traditions of the Hittites (23:1-20), so here the presentation of the wealth and blessing of Isaac increases the impact of his ability to exercise irenic

patience and restrained persistence in making peace; he could have done otherwise. The greatness of Isaac grew out of the Lord's blessing and did not lead "to the extension of his domain or to victory over his opponents, but to a final peace."<sup>23</sup>

A literary analysis of Genesis yields confirmation that Genesis 26:1-33 intends to present Isaac as a model for interpersonal and intercommunal relationships. The passage separates two stories of fraternal strife. The one in Genesis 25 tells the story of Jacob's taking advantage of his famished brother to buy his birthright (*b'kōrah*) (vv. 29-34). The other in Genesis 27 narrates the deception of Jacob in acquiring his brother's blessing (*b'rākāh*) (vv. 1-40). The assonance of these two Hebrew words suggests that the two stories belong together, having been deliberately separated by Genesis 26. In addition, since chapter 26:1-33 reveals no knowledge of the twin brothers, Jacob and Esau, the passage probably belongs sequentially to the period in which Isaac and Rebecca had no children. According to Stanley Walters, Genesis 26 "stands precisely where it does in order to function as a paradigm, a counter-paradigm for inter-personal relationships, to the duplicitous and destructive pattern shown in chapters 25 and 27."<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, chapter 26 stands second in the Jacob story (Genesis 25-35), corresponding<sup>25</sup> to the next-to-last chapter of that story (34), which features the duplicitous defeat of the inhabitants of Shechem by the sons of Jacob in the wake of the defiling of their sister, Dinah. Chapter 34, therefore, also serves as a contrasting model for relating to the people of the land.

Livingston considers the closing episode of the passage under discussion a "Covenant Negotiation" (vv. 26-33), a story which, as we mentioned above, almost always takes place between ethnic or intertribal groups.<sup>26</sup> Here again, we have evidence that the narrator intends this story as a model for cross-cultural or inter-ethnic relations.

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<sup>23</sup> Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, p. 430.

<sup>24</sup> Personal correspondence, February 7, 1985. I am indebted to professor Walters for the insights in this whole paragraph.

<sup>25</sup> What Walters actually wrote to me was not "corresponding" but "balancing palistrophically." A palistrophe, also called a chiasm, is a concentric structure. In other words the Jacob story or "cycle" features a concentric structure in which the second and next-to-last chapters are parallel and should be interpreted together. Parallel structures have been recognized as characteristic of Hebrew narrative for centuries. See Eugene E. Carpenter, "Literary Structure and Unbelief: A Study of Deuteronomy 1:6-46," *Asbury Theological Journal* 42 (1987): 83, n. 5; and Roland Meynet, *Treatise on Biblical Rhetoric*. Trans. Leo Arnold, Rubianto Solichin and Llane B. Briese (Leiden, NL: and Boston, MA: E. J. Brill, 2012), pp. 163-69.

<sup>26</sup> Livingston, *Pentateuch*, p. 248.

Isaac's servants have dug another well (v. 25). Suddenly Abimelech and his entourage, including military officers, arrive on the scene. The reader is prepared to see Isaac and his company dispossessed of their wells once again. To the reader's surprise, Abimelech and his men—on their own initiative—ask for a covenant, and the two parties eat together to seal the agreement. After the departure of Abimelech and company (vv. 26-31), the narrator concludes his story of cross-cultural well digging: “That same day Isaac's servants came and told him about the well which they had dug, and said to him, ‘We have found water’” (vv. 26-32).

Hebrew narrative makes its points subtly and indirectly. One way it does this is by juxtaposition of images. Here the well narrative is interrupted by the covenant with Abimelech, and only then comes the good news, “We have found water.” Evidently the story intends the well and its gift of water to be a symbol of the life which amicable relationships between peoples bestow on a society. Again, following Walters' careful reading of the text, this is the third use of the word “find” in the story (see also vv. 12 and 19).<sup>27</sup> The report, “We have found water,” just two words in Hebrew, captures graphically and cryptically the narrative's relentless insistence that a determination to “Settle in the land” (v. 2) with patience and persistence in peace-making is the way to life.

There are few people whose mission careers have been more fully permeated with the fragrance of the patience of Isaac and the suffering of Christ than Adoniram Judson's (1788-1850). A brilliant and precocious student, Judson graduated from Brown University at the age of nineteen as valedictorian of his class. After completing seminary, Judson sailed for India in 1812, expecting a fruitful career. That voyage began the long series of rejections and setbacks that became his life.

Immediately upon arrival in India, he was ordered to leave. After losing a child at sea he began work in Rangoon, Burma, the nation now called Myanmar. He labored with the language and the mission work there for seven years before baptizing his first convert. The king of Burma, a firm believer in non-theistic Theravada Buddhism, rejected Judson and his belief in one eternal God. Later Judson was incarcerated by the

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<sup>27</sup> In verse 12 the English translation “and reaped” (RSV) replaces “and found,” the literal translation of Hebrew *wayyimṣā*.

Burmese for twenty-one months under indescribable conditions as part of a group Burma intended to offer as human sacrifices to insure victory over the British with whom they were at war. His wife, who gave birth during this imprisonment, suffered from malaria, smallpox and spotted fever. Whenever she was conscious and not delirious she clung to the promise, “Call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me” (Psalm 50:15 KJV). To Judson’s great sorrow, both his wife and child died within six months of his release.

After the war Judson now released by the victorious British, served as an interpreter in negotiating peace between the British and the Burmese. He went on to translate the Bible into Burmese, publish a grammar of the Burmese language and complete most of a comprehensive English-Burmese dictionary. When in 1850 he died at sea, buried without a prayer, he had, in addition to his other setbacks, lost two wives and several children. At the same time, however, the Burmese church had seven thousand members. By the early 1980’s there were some 900,000 believers in the Christian community that Judson had helped to birth.<sup>28</sup> Adoniram Judson, wounded for the Anointed One, lived out the paradigm of patient endurance.

## Conclusion

This essay has attempted to demonstrate the significance of some patriarchal episodes in Genesis as models for cross-cultural mission. The cross-cultural application of these paradigms is not just one possible application. Rather, model inter-ethnic relationships emerge from the analysis as a *primary application of all four of the narratives we have discussed*.

Three of them contain what Livingston has designated “Covenant Negotiations” (14:12-24; 23:1-20; 26:1-33). This narrative type treats “relationships between ethnic groups, which may be made harmonious if a covenant can be made between them.”<sup>29</sup>

Three of the narratives contain other literary clues indicating that their purpose

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<sup>28</sup> Sherwood Eddy, *Pathfinders of the world Missionary crusade* (New York, NY: Abingdon, 1945), pp. 29-33; and Edward Judson, *The Life of Adoniram Judson* (New York, NY: Anson D. F. Randolph and Co., 1883). 1980 statistics from David B. Barrett, ed., *World Christian Encyclopedia: a Comparative Study of Churches and Religions in the Modern World A.D. 1900-2000* (Nairobi, Kenya: Oxford University Press, 1982), p.203. A more recent publication puts the number of affiliated church members in Burma now called Myanmar at 3.74 million. David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Trends* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2001), p. 413.

involves modeling constructive behavior among the people of the land. In the first model (13:1-18) the parallels between the choice offered Lot by Abraham and the gift of the land offered Abraham by the Lord, suggest Abraham as a model for Israel and “every generation of believers.” The prominence of the Hittites in Model 3, the purchase of the cave of Machpelah, and the fact that the second conclusion of the story ended with a reference to them, suggest that Abraham’s dealing with the Hittites was important. The position of Model 4, chapter 26, between two unfortunate interpersonal paradigms, and its position corresponding to chapter 34 of Genesis, an opposite paradigm for treating the people of the land, again point to the narrator’s intention to present Abraham and Isaac as models for “strangers and sojourners” among every generation of believers.

Abraham and Isaac are not weak people who have no choice but to cooperate. Rather they are portrayed as strong, wealthy and prosperous, their penchant for generosity, accommodation, negotiation and patience being a function of their determination to follow promise and command—a position frequently reinforced by further promise and blessing.

Model 1, Abraham’s dividing the land with his kinsman, Lot, exemplifies disputes over land, carried out in a way that models the Lord’s own generosity and faithfulness—*even when these procedures are ignored by others*. Model 2, Abraham’s response to the priest-king Melchizedek, undergirds the important task of finding contacts in the theological constructs of other cultures. Model 3, Abraham’s negotiation for a burial place for his wife, provides a window into cross-cultural relations that respect the traditions of a host people and involve commitment to live among them. And Model 4, Isaac’s patient digging again and again of wells, his freedom to let vengeance go in favor of kindness, illustrates the kind of attitude that cross-cultural witnesses could very well exhibit in their relations with others, even when they are rejected or ignored.

Effective cross-cultural mission relies on the promise and blessing of the Lord, rather than on making claims, securing privileges and insisting on rights. After drought, famine, opposition, resilience, and patience, come cries of joy, “We have found water!” “We have found water!”

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<sup>29</sup> Livingston, *Pentateuch*, 247.