

DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY

MODULE 1

LOOKING AT THE LAND

STUDY A: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM ABRAHAM?

Genesis 12–25 and the Doctrine of Discovery

INTRODUCTION

The Doctrine of Discovery grows out of the experience of Europeans arriving in new lands whose existence had been invisible to them before Christopher Columbus's journey to the hemisphere in 1492. The Bible also contains stories of people coming to new lands. Some of these stories share similarities with the aggression we see in the Doctrine of Discovery—our biblical spiritual ancestors conquering the indigenous peoples and claiming the land through violence because they think they have a God-ordained right and a divine command to seize the land from others.

The story of Abraham, in Genesis chapters 12 to 25, is really the first of the stories about people encountering new land. In this epic, the original faith-claim to the land is stated. But reading the story carefully reveals a different spirit—a different set of convictions and beliefs—regarding the way the story understands the relationship between Abraham and the people who live in this “land of promise.” By studying several episodes within this epic, we may discover a biblical alternative to the Doctrine of Discovery—an alternative that invites us to be fellow pilgrims with Abraham and Sarah, and to follow a new pathway to a more just world.

GENESIS 12:1-9 — A COMMAND, A COMMITMENT, AND A PROMISE

Read these verses and then discuss these questions and comments:

1. It helps to compare this story to the experience of Abram's* father, Terah. Look at Genesis 11:31. The command of God really encourages Abram to continue the journey which the family had begun years earlier.
2. Look at the first encounter between God and Abram that occurs at 12:1-3. What are the specific commitments God makes to Abram? What role does land specifically play in these verses? Is land named specifically, or is it implied?
3. Now compare those verses to God's second speech at 12:7. Is this the same promise or is it different? What is the land's relationship to Abram? To Abram's descendants?
4. Is it important that, at this point, in the story *Abram has no descendants*? How does that shape the commitment God is making toward Abram?
5. The promise gets repeated again, and elaborated, at Genesis 13:14-18. Does the story suggest what Abram is to do in order to claim the land as his own?

GENESIS 14 — ABRAM AND THE KINGS OF THE LAND

Skim through verse 12, then read the rest of the chapter and discuss these questions and comments:

1. *A NOTE:* It is difficult to identify and make sense of the kings listed through verse 12. In short, what appears to be happening is that various alliances of kings are waging war, perhaps to secure trade routes between Egypt and southern Arabia.
2. How would you evaluate Abram's capacity and skill for organizing and deploying troops on the basis of verses 13-16? For what reason did he do this?
3. Look at the interaction between Abram and the King of Sodom in verses 17-24. What motivates Abram in this episode?

* In the Genesis epic, two names are used for the same person: Abram and Abraham. The name shifts at Genesis 17:5. There are also two names for Abraham's wife: Sarai and Sarah.

4. If Abram has the capacity to wage war successfully, he could have used this military power to “conquer” the land and claim it for himself—but he doesn’t. What does this tell you about the way Abram sees his relationship to the land and its peoples?

GENESIS 18:22-33 — ABRAHAM PLEADS FOR THE CITIES

For this study we will not focus on the sins of the cities, but rather on the relationship of Abraham to the cities’ citizens. Read through this episode, and then discuss these three issues:

1. Why does Abraham plead as he does?
2. What is the source of Abraham’s concern for these cities?
3. What does this tell you about how Abraham understands his relationship with the people of the land?

GENESIS 23 — THE DEATH OF SARAH

Read through this chapter, and then discuss these three issues:

1. Look at what Abraham says at verse 4. What does this tell you about how Abraham understands his relationship to the land?
2. How does Abraham want to acquire a burial place for Sarah? What does this tell you about how Abraham understands the rights of the Hittites to their land?
3. Consider the promises God made to Abraham throughout this epic, beginning in chapter 12 of Genesis. Try to summarize how Abraham understands his relationship to “the land of promise.”

SUMMING UP ABRAHAM

In the 1990s, biblical scholar Norman Habel* studied the variety of ways the Hebrew Scriptures understand the relationship of God's people to the land of Israel. Here are some samples of the way Habel characterized the understanding of land that operates within the stories of Abraham:

- "Abraham migrates from one land to another.... Significantly, the land seems open to migrants; there is no mention of any barriers set up by the inhabitants." (p. 118)
- "[Abraham] is not an unwelcome alien or a passing traveler. He is the equivalent of an immigrant who chooses to put down roots and buy land on the terms of the host country." (p. 119)
- "Abraham is portrayed as an exemplar of how to share land, overcome conflict, and mediate blessing to the inhabitants of the land. The host people of the land live together with Abraham as a welcome immigrant in their midst. For peaceful relationships to be maintained, Abraham must recognize the entitlement of the peoples of Canaan in their respective territories in the land." (p. 123)
- "Abraham respects the Canaanites, their culture, their god, and their territories. Where land is in dispute, he negotiates peaceful settlements. When the land is attacked, he fights for the people of the land. When he needs a burial site for Sarah, he buys land in accordance with the local laws of land purchase. Abraham is a peaceful immigrant who willingly recognizes the land entitlements of the peoples of the host country." (p. 146)

Now please consider these three questions:

1. What insights from your studies of these chapters of Genesis illustrate the points Habel is making?
2. How might the history of the Western Hemisphere have been different if European explorers had shared Abraham's convictions about the land and its inhabitants, rather than adopting the more aggressive and violent models of conquest that unfolded?

* Norman C. Habel, *The Land Is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1995).

3. Does the story of Abraham offer a new and different way for European-descended Christians to work with Native Americans in seeking justice today?

AFTER ABRAHAM

While the Abraham epic offers people of biblical faith an affirming alternative to the Doctrine of Discovery, we need to acknowledge that other traditions in the Bible were more brutal in the way they depicted relationships between land and people. We also need to recognize how these harsh depictions helped to create the biblical warrant that sixteenth-century Christians used to frame the Doctrine of Discovery.

Abraham occupied a specific relationship to the land of promise and its peoples because, in the tradition, the land was promised not just to Abraham, but to his descendants. Genesis covers only the first four generations of the Abrahamic clan. At the close of the Genesis narrative, the descendants of Abraham still do not number “a great nation.” These small numbers of Abraham and his immediate descendants create the conditions that define the family’s more open-ended relation to the land and its indigenous inhabitants.

By the close of Genesis, the family of Abraham is relocating to Egypt. According to the biblical story, it is in Egypt that the number of descendants explodes. This rapid increase in their numbers is interpreted by the Egyptians as a political threat (see Exodus 1:7-9). This, in turn, becomes a major factor in Egypt’s growing oppression and harsh treatment of their Hebrew slaves. In the events that lead from Moses, to the exodus, and eventually to the return to the land of promise, the descendants now can be called a “great nation.” As a result, their relationship to the land and its inhabitants is vastly different from what we saw in the Abraham epic.

1. Read Joshua 1:1-6. This is God’s commission to Joshua as the people prepare to re-enter the land of promise. How does this compare to the notion of Abraham as a resident alien in a host country? What elements of the Doctrine of Discovery do you see in these words?
2. Read the summary of Joshua’s conquests at Joshua 11:16-23. How does this compare with the Doctrine of Discovery? If European monarchs saw

themselves as having a divine mandate to take a “new world” as a “new promised land,” how do these stories create the pretext for the Doctrine of Discovery? How, in the sixteenth century, were Native Americans like the inhabitants of Canaan conquered by Joshua’s forces?

3. We have in the Bible, then, two radically different models of the relationship of land to people. How do people of biblical faith decide which of these two models they will follow as they live in the world? How do we bear responsibility for our interpretations of Scripture and the way we apply this book to our understanding of and actions in the world?