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# Abraham and the Multiverse

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**Abstract**
This article uses a dialogic approach to examine the character of Abraham in Genesis 18 in light of his multiple roles in the story and through the lens of internal family systems theory. The study of the varied characters of Abraham contributes to our understanding of God and the nature of God's call on Abraham and by extension, our lives.

**Keywords**
Abraham, Sarah, Genesis, Dialogic, Chronotope, Mikhail Bakhtin, Multiverse, Internal Family Systems

## Dialogic Readings

This study begins with the premise that the Bible is an inherently dialogical text. That is, it comes from a variety of sources over time, and these various voices are engaged in an ongoing dialogue among themselves and with us. In the ancestral narratives, these sources constitute an ongoing conversation around identity, what it means to be the people of God across time and in different spaces. This dialogue involves not only the curators and keepers of biblical stories and traditions but those of us who interact with Scripture today. Our experiences and points of view are added to those in the text as we participate in this ongoing, unfolding exchange. This approach is rooted in the work of the Russian literary theorist and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) and his development of dialogic criticism.

The dialogic approach is well suited to exploring the theological content we find in the Bible.[1] Unlike monologic truth, which is systematic and separate, dialogic truth has the following characteristics:

1) Dialogic truth is greater than a single consciousness and requires a plurality of consciousnesses. A dialogue, in contrast to a monologue, requires more than one speaker. Dialogic truth is characterized by more than one voice or polyphony.
2) Dialogic truth has an embodied quality. It does not exist apart from a community, context, or experience.

1 Carol Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible and Dialogic Truth," *JR* 6 (1996): 290–306 (290).

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3) Dialogic truth is described as "event" rather than system; An "event" is dynamic, something ongoing in time and space. The concept of "event" prioritizes "process" over the closed system.[2] Bakhtin uses the term "chronotope" to describe the way a story organizes time and space.[3] In biblical narrative, where chronology is often irregular, and historical accuracy is elusive, chronotope offers another way to think about the structure of the material. Chronotopes are transhistorical and are the points from which "scenes in a [narrative] unfold."[4]
4) Bakhtin also introduced the concept of "unfinalizability" in his work. The idea here is that "nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future."[5]

These principles are congenial to the study of the Bible, because the Bible is a composite text. In its final form, Scripture often follows its own rules. We may encounter multiple, sometimes conflicting accounts with markedly different perspectives. Important details may be left out. We may begin with one story and find that another story interrupts the narrative flow. Chronological and geographical accuracy is optional in the Bible. When we implement the principles of dialogic criticism, we can navigate Scripture through the polyphony of voices, looking for events and chronotope, and celebrating the fact that we will never fully grasp all the truths that Scripture has for us.

## Abraham in the Multiverse

Genesis 12–50, the section designated the "ancestral narratives," commences with the Abraham cycle. The narrative begins with the call of Abraham in Gen 12:1, and it ends with the patriarch's death in Gen 25:11. In Gen 12:1–3, God asks Abraham to leave the world that he is familiar with and promises him land, descendants, and blessing. This three-fold promise will define the ancestors' lives and shape their stories. The Abraham cycle chronicles the patriarch's life as a seminomad who seeks to realize the promise of God.

Tradition critics say that these units were collected and combined to form this block of material associated with Abraham. Yet the narrative units are, according to Walter Brueggemann, "not easily contained in any scheme, and this arrangement should not be considered authoritative."[6] In other words, although there are some groupings of materials, the order of these pieces is not consistently chronological, nor can we discern in their ordering a single definitive pattern. However, when we consider the units in dialogue with each other, they do offer a testimony to Abraham's formation as he lives into the fulfillment of God's promise.

The text critical history of the ancestral narratives leaves us with an amalgamation of units that lacks a clear chronology. But that does not mean the material lacks order. Bakhtin's literary work

2 Johanna Seibt, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Metaphysics Research Lab (Stanford: Stanford University, 2022), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/process-philosophy/.

3 Chris Baldick, "Chronotope," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198715443.001.0001/acref-9780198715443-e-202?rskey=ZDqtaW&result=1.

4 M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 250.

5 Editor's preface in Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxix.

6 Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, IBC (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 107.

reminds us that stories can arrange themselves in a variety of ways. In the Abraham cycle, where do we find the organizing centers? Where are the knots of the narrative tied and untied?[7]

Abraham's story is presented to us as a journey. Moving out on God's promise, he leaves Haran, (which means "crossroads") and journeys toward Canaan (12:5). He then goes to Bethel, Ai, and "journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb" (12:8-9). Abraham's story follows the life of a semi-nomad who moves from place to place with his family and possessions, settling for a while and then moving on to the next location. Abraham is attending to the stuff of life, and every now and then God shows up to make big promises with grand gestures. After each theophany, Abraham is left to figure out what to do with these soul-stirring encounters in the living of his daily life. What does God's promise mean in the face of hostile neighbors, family strife, infertility, or age? How do God's promises make meaning in the face of Abraham's daily existence?

Through this dialogic lens, every theophany functions as chronotope, a "come to YHWH" moment. How is Abraham progressing with his own journey to fully receive the promise of God into his daily life? I propose that the movement of Abram as a semi-nomad signals his internal journey, the one he undertakes to become the recipient of God's amazing promise. Theophany holds the story together.

From a faith standpoint, it could be argued that the narrative is not concerned with God's part of the promise so much as it is Abraham's ability to receive it. If God's part of the promise is secure, then the narrative is about Abraham's journey to the promise, which leads to another understanding of the language of God's initial call in Gen 12:1–3 where God says *lekh ləkā.* The first two words of God's call to Abram consist of a second-person masculine singular imperative of the verb *hālak,* meaning "to go," leaving us with: "you go." The second word, *ləkā,* is prefixed with the preposition *lamed* (signifying "to, for, or in regard to") and suffixed with the second-person masculine singular pronoun. Possible interpretations include, "Go forth," or "you go," "go for/regarding yourself," or "you, you really go." The personal pronoun serves as emphasis, and the *lamed* is used reflexively. But there is another option, if the *lamed* signifies "to" instead of "for," rendering a translation of: "Go, go *to* yourself."

The journey upon which Abraham embarks is both external and internal. God breaks into Abraham's situation not only to restate the promise, but to check up on his spiritual development. Whenever God appears, there is the intersection of two realms, like the alternate realities in the multiverse of science and science fiction. The "multiverse," in simple terms, proposes that beyond our known universe, there exist other universes, other realities.[8] This concept originated in physics and has made a mark in the world of science fiction and graphic novels, as characters and superheroes encounter parallel universes where things are different from the world they inhabit. These other universes or realms offer mirrors to our own universe. For example, in the Superman franchise, there is a "Bizarro" world where the characters encounter a twisted version of their world and its inhabitants. More recently the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) incorporated the multiverse into the plots of "Ant Man" (2015), "Dr. Strange" (2016), "Spiderman: Into the Spiderverse" (2018), "Ant Man and Wasp" (2018), and "Spiderman: No Way Home (2021).

7 Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 250.

8 Hugh Everett was a graduate student at Princeton University when he developed the "many worlds interpretation" of quantum physics. https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691145075/the-everett-interpretation-of-quantum-mechanics.

In 2022, the MCU released a movie in which the multiverse took center stage: "Dr. Strange in the Multiverse of Madness" (2022). In this movie, the wizard Dr. Stephen Strange attempts to subdue the chaos that threatens our world in the form of incursion of other universes.[9] Two other heroes, America Chavez and Wong, form a team with Strange to stop the advances of the Scarlet Witch, whose pursuit of Chavez's power threatens the stability of the multiverse. In the process of moving from universe to universe, Strange must reckon with the reality that in some universes, in some alternative contexts, he is the bad guy, the threat to the world. In each universe he must achieve the same task—even with different circumstances—to stop the advances of the Scarlet Witch and deal with his own failings in the process. Haunted by a line delivered to him at the beginning of the movie, "You always have to be the one holding the knife," Strange learns that in order to be successful, he too must change. Each of the multiple universes is another chance for Stephen Strange to adapt his approach so that he can save the day. By the conclusion of the movie, it is not only the world that is saved. Stephen Strange has experienced redemption by learning how to let go of his tendency to control everything.

There is a correspondence between the multiverses of the film and the theophanies in the Abraham cycle. Every time God appears, Abraham is reminded of this other-worldly plane from which God's promise originates. With every divine incursion, he has an opportunity to receive and live into the promise. God appears, reiterating or interpreting the promise, and with each appearance, Abraham struggles to receive it, to "go to himself" as instructed in the reflexive command *lekh, ləkā*. This stretching out to receive God's blessing is the formation of his new identity.

God calls Abraham in ch. 12, and God appears and/or speaks to him again in chs. 13, 15, 17, 18, 21, and 22. In ch. 13, God shows up after Abram separates from Lot and promises that Abram's descendants will be like the dust of the earth. In ch. 15, God appears and promises that his offspring will be like the stars in the heavens. In ch.17, God appears and changes Abram's name to Abraham and Sarai's name to Sarah. When Abraham hears God's promise that Sarah would have a son in this chapter, he laughed. Next, in ch. 18, God visits Abraham in the form of three visitors, reiterates the promise of descendants, and Sarah laughs. In ch. 21, God tells Abraham that he may send Hagar and Ishmael away because Ishmael will also be a great nation. Finally in ch. 22, God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. The appearances form thematic pairs. God's promises in chs. 13 and 15 both speak to the number of Abram's descendants, and these two theophanies appear before the birth of Ishmael. Chapters 17 and 18 both include the element of laughter, a prelude to the birth of their son Isaac, whose name means "laughter." Chapters 21 and 22 can both be classified as a "threat to the promise" passages. One son is sent away, and another is almost sacrificed. These three pairs of appearances are attached to the birth of Ishmael and Isaac and the threat to them both. Without the birth and survival of Isaac (and arguably Ishmael), Abraham cannot realize God's promise. Each of these theophanies creates an alternate reality or universe in which Abraham must adapt or respond to the promise of God in the hopes that he will one day receive the promise of God.

The incursion of an alternate universe offers a mirror to us and our own. The theophany in Genesis 18 is no exception, but this time the interaction between two worlds is a mirror that reflects both Abraham and Sarah. Sarah is pulled from the margins into the role of recipient of God's promise.

9 "Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness," dir. Sam Raimi (Marvel Studios, 2022).

## Abraham and Sarah's Encounter with the Lord in Genesis 18

The theophany in Genesis 18 begins with a visit from three men who come upon the encampment of Abraham, and we, the readers, know it is the LORD because the narrator tells us so (18:1–2). Upon their arrival, Abraham goes into action, extending the laws of hospitality. In Abraham's time, hospitality was not simply a courtesy. In the harsh reality of a semi-nomadic life in the wilderness, hospitality was about survival. In the ANE, there was a code amongst Bedouins to feed and protect strangers from their harsh surroundings. It is also the case that the stranger could offer something to the host as an expression of gratitude, perhaps in the form of a gift or a favor. Presented with the arrival of the three men, Abraham knows what to do. Note the sequence of action. Abraham rushes out to meet them, bows down and invites the guests to stop and rest. His haste to be hospitable is reflected in his commands and the actions of his wife Sarah and the servant. He runs to the guests to welcome them (18:2), and he then rushes to Sarah and tells her to make cakes (18:6). He runs to the herd, takes an animal and hands it over to the servant who hastens to prepare it (18:7).

The action verbs create a sense of urgency in Abraham's response to his guests. Yet, for all the hurrying, we know that the preparation of an animal takes quite a bit of time, and so there is a tension between the hurrying and the waiting. We literally have a "hurry up and wait" situation. We also observe that although Abraham is in the role of host, he is not doing the work alone. Instead, he functions as the front man, greeting and extending hospitality, while Sarah and the servant do the work of preparing the feast. He assembles the prepared meal—the calf prepared by the servant, the curds and milk—and he places it before them. This is like the carving of the turkey at Thanksgiving. In many American household traditions, the patriarch of the house carves the turkey, whether or not he prepared it, performing a ceremonial role. In somewhat similar fashion, Abraham presides over the meal, and Sarah is in place within the tent. When the men speak again, this time they issue a question: "Where is your wife, Sarah?"

Let's assume for the moment that everything that has taken place so far has happened according to plan. Abraham has functioned in his role properly, as have Sarah and the servant. If that is the case, the question addressed to Abraham is a bit out of order. Does a stranger inquire of the host's wife? And how does the stranger know her name? In the patriarchal and hierarchical construct, does she belong in this conversation, or is she exactly where she should be, on the periphery, in the tent, as Abraham indicates, presumably out of sight, but within earshot, in case the guests need something. "One" of the guests makes the promise, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son" (18:10). Although the conversation is about Sarah, she is not a part of it, and so she engages in a dialogue with herself. She laughs "to herself" and asks a question of herself, "After I have grown old and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" (v. 12). The visitor, now identified as the LORD, speaks to Abraham about Sarah, while Sarah speaks to herself. And now the LORD responds to Sarah's internal conversation by speaking to Abraham, who presumably does not hear Sarah's response. Note that the LORD's response to Sarah's question is in the form of another question: "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" (vv. 13–14). The question is followed with a promise, "At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son" (v. 14). Sarah responds with a denial of her laughter, and the LORD counters, "Oh yes, you did laugh" (v. 15). The exchange begins with one of the visitors asking Abraham *about* Sarah, and over the course of this dialogue, the LORD speaks directly *to* Sarah. Is Sarah still in the tent by the end of the conversation? What are we to make of the fact that after Abraham gives Sarah's location, he is no longer the center of the exchange, but she is?

Let's observe two movements in this narrative unit. One movement is to identify the visitors. The three men appear. They speak in v. 5, accepting Abraham's hospitality. *They* ask about Sarah's

location in v. 9, and in v.10 *one* speaks. In v. 13 this speaker is the LORD. There are many ways to address these confusing references. We want to acknowledge the presence of different traditions that are combined into this narrative. A literary reading, such as a dialogic approach, sees a pattern in the final form of the text. The identity of the speaker moves from vague to specific, and correspondingly, as the identity of the speaker comes into focus, so does the individual to whom the promise is directed. In this hierarchical world, the LORD messages Sarah, first through Abraham and then directly about her laughter at the LORD's promise. Before the promise of a child is fulfilled, the LORD has a direct encounter with Sarah. This is the second movement in the unit, from Abraham, the head of the household, to Sarah standing behind the tent.

I have long been intrigued with the positioning of Sarah the matriarch in this story, and I have also been curious about her laughter. Her laughter is a natural response. Also, everything she says is true. She has, in her own words, grown old, and her husband is old, so how is she to have pleasure? Her word for "grown old" means "worn" (*bəlōtî*), and the word for "pleasure" (*'ednâ*)) means "abundant moisture," the opposite of her current state. This word for pleasure (*'ednâ* ) is also the root for Eden, the garden of delight. She laughs both at the possibility of bearing a child and the kind of pleasure with her husband that would produce one. If Eden is the garden of pleasure, she is the embodiment of the wilderness, and she has as little chance of getting back to Eden as Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. Moreover, the previous chapter includes an account of Abraham laughing at the promise of God to them in their old age, "Abraham threw himself on his face and laughed as he said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?" (17:17). In response to Abraham's laughter God simply repeats what he has promised before that God will keep his promise. The exchange with Sarah is different, and it is in Sarah's laughter, and the LORD's response, that we witness a turning point in the narrative.

## Internal Family Systems

I now invite you to consider one more lens, and that is the lens of internal family systems theory. Whereas family systems theory, the work of Edwin Friedman, examines the dynamics between individuals within organizations and families,[10] internal family systems is interested in the multiple sub-personalities in an individual.[11] The premise of internal family systems is that we are made up of three parts or sub-personalities that co-exist. We have the part of us that presents itself to the world, but there are also parts of us that hold hurt, fear, or shame from early experiences, and these parts continue to carry the emotions and memories associated with those experiences. The outward-facing part is the "manager," and the manager's job is to control our surroundings, manage emotions, and navigate daily life. In patriarchal cultures, the manager is often male. The parts that carry our painful memories and emotions are known as "exiles." and when the exiles erupt from their designated spaces, what results is called a "firestorm." The third part of the personality, the "firefighter," reacts when the exile attempts to surface. The firefighter attempts to soothe or distract the exile.[12]

When internal family systems theory is applied to Genesis 18, the characters of Abraham, Sarah, and the servant are all parts of one person. In this story, Abraham functions as the "manager,"

10 Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford, 1985).

11 https://ifs-institute.com/resources/articles/internal-family-systems-model-outline.

12 Richard C. Schwartz and Martha Sweezy, *Internal Family Systems Therapy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guildford, 2020), 52–53.

overseeing the situation, standing in his role as patriarch and extending the invitation. He sends Sarah and the servant to do their work in the background as he functions as the ceremonial head of the family and the recipient of God's promise. His behavior includes his orders to Sarah and the servant to hurry so he can present the feast. They serve in the background, but he cannot provide hospitality without them. In the story and in the cultural context, Sarah, as the infertile wife, is the "exile," the carrier of hurt, fear, and shame. Her body, not that of Abraham, is the reminder of barrenness, and she stands at the tent opening, hidden, perhaps symbolizing the place we assign to our own disappointments, fear, and shame. In internal family systems it is the job of the manager to keep the exiles contained and hidden from conscious awareness to avoid distress and pain.[13] In this story, the LORD circumvents Abraham the manager to get to the exiled Sarah and confront her with the promise.

In this interpretation, Sarah is a part of the shame Abraham carries around and tries to hide, and the LORD will not allow it to remain hidden. In fact, the promise of their child will not take place in the narrative until Sarah is called out of exile, out from the tent. The encounter in the first part of ch.18 is shaped so that the vague reference to three visitors becomes the LORD and two attendants/angels, alongside the invitation to Abraham's hidden pieces to become integrated. Laughter is the action around which the narrative pivots. Whereas Abram's laughter is at the absurdity of God's promise, Sarah's response to God's promise is like a firestorm that brings with it the exilic components, the pain of being withered, and the shame of her embodiment. The promise is Eden, and she is dried up. Her honesty in this moment seems to function as the opening into which God can ask the question to end all questions. "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" (18:14) The verb for wonderful, *pālā'*, means "surpassing, extraordinary, difficult, wonderful." This question is directed towards Sarah's imagination. The invitation to exercise faith comes to the parts that are hidden away, reminding us of the role of imagination in the development of faith. Our imagination fills in the spaces and gaps that we cannot see. In this sense, the question addressed to Sarah has a function of a call. Perhaps we could identify this passage, then, as the call of Sarah. With this lens of internal family systems in the narrative cycle of Abraham, we see that the fulfillment of the promise regarding Isaac cannot happen without Sarah's full participation, not only physically, but imaginatively. The promise requires both the character Sarah and the Sarah who is exiled as part of Abraham. Abraham's growth to receive the promise of God depends on his integration of the parts of him that he has exiled. Thus, the call of God to Abraham is a call to wholeness, and this is what is meant in the call, "Go, go to yourself, all of yourselves."

## Conclusion

I conclude with three observations. First, an internal family systems reading of this passage leads to a theological observation. Namely, God will not call us to a thing without calling us to wholeness. Perhaps the thing standing between us and our realization of God's work in our lives is not "out there," but internal to us. Second, the theophanies in the Abraham cycle are reminders of the alternate universes and realities that occur when we encounter the divine. Like Abraham, our obligation is to grow in such a way so that we can live in more than one space or reality. Third, the movement towards Abraham's integration in the first part of ch.18 might explain the confident Abraham who bargains with God in the second part of this chapter, when Abraham pleads for the lives of those living in Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:16–33). It is only because Abraham has managed to integrate the exiled parts of himself that he is able to bargain with God. This reading might also inform the following chapter, where a failure of hospitality and broken family systems leads to disaster.

13 Ibid., 50.