



TRADITIONAL TALES (GEN 12:10–20; 20:1–8; 26:6–11)

By Ronald Simkins

The ancestor stories in Genesis are made up of traditional tales that are told according to “fixed-forms.” These are typical tales composed of traditional elements, which any particular storyteller may elaborate and vary within limits determined by skill and audience rapport. Some of the various fixed-forms found in Genesis are: birth of an ancestor to a barren mother; encounter with the future betrothed at a well; the ancestor pretends that his wife is his sister; rivalry between a barren, favored wife and a fertile co-wife or concubine; danger in the desert and discovery of a well; treaty between the ancestor and a local king; and the testament of a dying ancestor. This exercise uses fixed-forms to lead students through a reading of Genesis.

Fixed-forms are culturally determined; the stories have a fixed form because they describe typical features of the culture. For example, the “encounter with the future betrothed at a well” became a traditional fixed-form because wells were one of the few places in the ancient Near East where men and women would meet. Both men and women would go to wells because the water they provided was essential to life. Thus, when a person told a story about a man meeting his future wife, the well was a natural setting.

Because fixed-forms are culturally determined, what is interesting for interpretation is not how one story is similar to another, but rather how each story is different. The differences in the story result from the particular message that the author is communicating, for the author will give each story of a fixed-form unique details depending on the context in which the story is told. For example, Genesis contains three stories in which “the ancestor pretends that his wife is his sister” before a foreign king. Each story is told differently concerning the relationship of the king to the ancestor’s wife. This “difference” is the result of the meaning of the particular story in its context.

I begin class with a brief presentation of Genesis and the character of traditional tales. In order to illustrate the dynamics of such tales, I use the three wife-sister stories (Gen 12:10–20; 20:1–8; 26:6–11) as the subject of a collaborative group exercise. I divide the students into groups and ask them to reread the three wife-sister stories (the students would have been assigned to read large portions of Genesis, including these stories, in preparation for the class). After the students have had sufficient time to read the stories, I hand out to each group an assignment sheet asking them to do the following: (1) Identify and list all the features of the three stories that are similar. (2) In three separate columns, list the distinguishing features of each story. (3) From the list of similarities, describe in a paragraph the “fixed-form” of the story. (4) Identify the social and cultural values embedded in this “fixed-form”—in other words, what kind of culture would tell such stories? (5) From the list of distinguishing features, explain how each feature fits the literary context of the story.

If time permits, I select four of the groups to write one of their “lists” (of similarities and distinguishing features) on the blackboard, and then supplement those lists with

suggestions from other groups. After the groups finish their assignments, I discuss their results of the third and fourth tasks with the whole class. The students easily recognize the skeleton of the stories and present this as the fixed-form. It is often sufficient to have one or two groups read their paragraph of the “fixed-form.” More interesting are the values that the students associate with the fixed-form; values related to gender roles and social status are readily identified. The significance of the distinguishing features of the stories is more difficult for the students to grasp, and thus results in a more engaging discussion. The students note the different status of the wife in each story, among other differences. I lead the students to recognize how the wife’s status shapes the story. For example, in Gen 12 the childless Sarai is given to the Pharaoh as a wife. In this context, Sarai’s barrenness is an obstacle to the fulfillment of God’s promise of descendants to Abram, and so the story implies that Abram gives her in exchange for the wedding gifts from Pharaoh. However, in the stories preceding Gen 20, God promises Sarah a child. Thus, when Abraham gives her to Abimelech as a wife, the narrator emphasizes that Abimelech does not have sexual relations with her. The new context of the story raises concern over the paternity of the child that Sarah will bear in Gen 21. Finally, in Gen 26, Isaac simply tells Abimelech that Rebekah is his sister; he does not give her to the king in marriage. Because she is the mother of two sons, Rebekah’s status in the house is secure.

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