Genesis 12—50: Resources

# Genesis 12 – 50: What Sort of Information?

Our assumptions about the kind of information a text gives us have an effect on what we find there. To illustrate this point I here summarize comments on the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar in Genesis 16. I illustrate different approaches from different commentators for clarity, though the commentators themselves mix the approaches. It’s worth asking to what extent the different writers get their material from the text and to what extent from elsewhere. What helps them see things? And mis-see things? This approach can help us critique and expand our own reading. Interpreters bring to the story assumptions about the kind of insights it should offer. We ourselves as readers are likely then to find some of their interpretations more congenial than others. Some we may find outrageous. The question we then have to ask is why we react the way we do. Are we ourselves reading our concerns and convictions into the stories? Reading the stories from a perspective or context different from our own helps us come to the text with new eyes and see things that actually are there, things that we would otherwise miss. It helps us to see that what seem to us the obvious and unquestionable meaning of a text may be open to question after all. It helps the free the text from our interpretation of it, and also to free us from our own interpretation of it.

## Parenetic or hortatory material – examples of how to behave or how not to behave

Martin Luther in his commentary *Genesis* (1539): Abram and Sarah model how to act in faith, how spouses take counsel together when their faith is tried, and how to resolve disturbances in the family. They receive from Hagar the world’s typical hostility; Hagar is puffed up and lording it over Sarah. Sarah’s dealings with her are justified though overdone. Abram and Sarah realize their mistake but Hagar does not, though she is later an example in her response as God shows mercy to her. God fetches her back so that she can fulfill her vocation in domestic life.

John Calvin in his commentary *Genesis* (1554): Sarah departs from the word of God (concerning the marriage order) in order to see the word of God fulfilled (God’s promise). Abram and Sarah illustrate the ease with which we can use the wrong means to find the fulfillment of what is indeed God’s will and the ease with which we can be led astray by the people nearest to us. Abram rightly surrenders Hagar to Sarah, Sarah rightly disciplines her, and Hagar wrongly flees rather than acknowledging her fault.

## Theological material – illustrations of the nature and purpose of God

Basil Atkinson in his commentary *Genesis* (1954): Whereas Abram and Sarah represent the new covenant with its heavenly Jerusalem, Hagar and her child picture the old covenant made at Sinai whose members are in bondage (Hagar is an Egyptian and a slave) and the earthly Jerusalem. The union of Abram and Hagar suggests the putting of law alongside gospel or the expectation that an unredeemed humanity can fulfill the law, which are both futile. Hagar’s despising of Sarah recalls the Jews’ despising of Gentiles. Her fleeing recalls the Jews’ efforts to evade the old covenant obligations. Her having a son suggests the way the old covenant engendered a people, but to bondage (cf. Gal 4:24). [The context of this reference in Gal 4:21-31 suggests the approach the commentator takes.]

Claus Westermann in his commentary *Genesis* (1981): God has closed Sarah’s womb and has announced to Hagar the birth of a son. He grants new life; he denies new life. The declaration about God that dominates the narrative is laid down in the name of the son, Ishmael, a name of praise, “God hears.” Hagar’s description of God, El-roi, “You are the God who sees me,” is in fact saying the same thing. In the messenger’s greeting, Hagar has met God in action, reaching the earth and beholding the human in her distress. The action recurs in the story in Luke 1: “for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.” The person of the messenger of Yahweh, both divine and human, suggests a biblical (rather than Greek) starting point for thinking about the incarnation.

## Anthropological material – illustrations of what it can mean to be human

[“Anthropological” here doesn’t refer to the discipline(s) of anthropology but to what it means to be human. Specifically, these are studies about what it means to be a woman, by an Anglo-American, a Latina, and an African American.]

Phyllis Trible in her book *Texts of Terror* (1984): Hagar is a fleeting yet haunting figure in Scripture. Her story depicts oppression in three familiar forms: race, class, and sex. Hagar is one of the first people in scripture to be used, abused, and rejected. All sorts of women who go through those experiences themselves find their story in hers. She is also the first person in Scripture whom a divine messenger visits, the first woman to hear an annunciation, the only woman to receive a divine promise of descendants, and the first person who dares to name God (“Hagar is a theologian”). But she experiences exodus without liberation, revelation without salvation, wilderness without covenant, wanderings without land, promise without fulfillment, unmerited exile without return.

Elsa Tamez in her chapter in *New* *Eyes* *for* *Reading*: Hagar and her son belong to the marginalized; they complicate the history of salvation, upsetting God’s magnificent plans for Abram and Sarah, but now they cannot be erased from the working out of this plan. Hagar is surprised to find God coming near her, a slave (“Can it be that I have come to see the one who sees me?”, v. 13 in the Jerusalem Bible translation). Is God really interested in a slave, an Egyptian, a woman? But she is the one who gives God a name.

Renita J. Weems in her study *Only a Sister Away*: for black women, the story of Hagar is a haunting one. It is a story of exploitation and persecution suffered by a slave woman at the hands of her mistress. It is a story we have read in our mothers’ eyes (she says) those afternoons when they came home after a hard day’s work as a domestic. And if it is not our mother’s story, it is our grandmother’s and our great grandmother’s. The similarity of our stories as black and white women in America to the stories of Hagar and Sarah warrants taking the enormous risk of opening up the deep festering wounds between us and beginning to explore the possibilities for divine healing.

Noteworthy also are J. Cheryl Exum’s comments about Abraham and Isaac passing off their wives as their sisters, in her book *Fragmented Women* (1993). Whereas we usually ask why this happened three times, she asks why Genesis includes the story three times, notes that the woman hardly feature in the stories (they are all about the men) and suggests that hey illustrate issues about men’s attitudes to their wives’ sexuality. Stories encode unthinkable and unacknowledged sexual fantasies. There is something fearful and attractive about your wife being taken by another man; it is a horrible idea, but it validates your choice. Or you feel ambivalent about the obligation of marriage. The stories are about fear and desire.

## Political/Missiological material

Professor Evelyne Reisacher in a chapel sermon at Fuller Theological Seminary: Hagar is a Palestinian woman, an ancestor of the Arab peoples. She is outside the chosen line and she is ill-treated by the members of the chosen line. But God listens to her and reaches out to her, and she relates to God. Other missiologists have noted that the Arab peoples, as Hagar’s descendants, share in the blessing Gog gives to her and her descendants. There is a sense in which they, too, are a chosen line.

# (b) Responses to Questions about Genesis 12—50

There is more info in my *Genesis for Everyone Part 1* and *Genesis for Everyone Part 2* (Louisville: WJK/London: SPCK, 2010).

*How do we stand in relation to Abraham’s blessing?*

*\*\**Paul says that we as Gentiles as well as Jews become the heirs of it through Jesus (see Galatians 3).

*Does the promise to Abraham about the land still apply to Israel? Who is Israel? Is it ethnic Israel? Is it "spiritual Israel"? If it is ethnic Israel, how pure does it need to be and how do we determine ethnicity?*

\*\*I assume that if God makes a promise, he is bound by it—at least, he seems to take that view, and Paul assumes it in Romans 9—11. Paul doesn’t mention the land, and the NT makes hardly any reference to it, but it seems likely that it takes it for granted, partly because you can’t have a people without a land. The idea of a land is bound up in the idea of a people—hence the association of the two in the promise. But the Israel in the theological sense doesn’t mean the state of Israel but the Jewish people, which is a much bigger body. Further, the promise is made to Abraham’s descendants, who include a lot more than the Jewish people (see the comments on Ishmael later in these questions). And further again, people who come to trust in the God of Abraham come to share in his promise (see previous question). So in an ideal world it would be neat if all Jews and Arabs (not to say all Christians) could be free to live in the land, though there isn’t enough room for that! In the actual world, the “two-state solution” might be as near as we can get—the one-state solution would be better if it meant everyone was a full citizen.

*Is “the angel of Yahweh” God himself, or do people speak of him that way because he is God’s messenger? What does it mean that Hagar and Jacob saw God’s face?*

*\*\**In the Hagar story Yahweh’s aide appears to Hagar and in Jacob’s story a “man” wrestles with him. It seems that in both stories God takes on human form, and it is this human form that they see. Yahweh’s aide is someone who in some sense represents Yahweh yet is in some sense distinguishable from him—so he can do God’s work and represent God’s presence but not in too dangerous a fashion, so that it fried you up.

*Why was God debating with himself on whether or not to inform Abraham of his plan to destroy Sodom? It would appear God is confused about what to do in this situation.*

\*\*I would see the question as a rhetorical one. I happen just to have read a commentator observing that the question “What are human beings?” in Psalm 8 isn’t really a question but an exclamation, and this is similar. God is really saying “I couldn’t possibly not tell Abraham!” This fits with the fact that there is no word for “No” at the beginning of v. 19, as there is in NRSV. That reflects the fact that v. 18 is really more like a statement.

*One thing I find puzzling is trying to determine how and when God will decide to intervene. For example, he intervenes on behalf of Sarah with Pharaoh. Yet, he does not seem to bring huge consequences when Judah sleeps with a prostitute. When God decides to enact justice seems vague to me.*

*\*\**Yes, there’s no way of telling when God will decide to act! God isn’t predictable! Maybe God is always having to decide whether this is a moment to intervene and when to show mercy and when to hold back and when it is a moment to chastise - just like a parent.

*I found the need for God to “test” Abraham puzzling to me. If God knows everything even before it happens, why does He need to do the “test”? Shouldn’t he know the answer already? What is the point for it? Was the test needed for God or for the reader or for even Abraham?*

*\*\**Genesis makes explicit that it was needed for God (Gen 22:12), though it is also for Abraham and the reader. There are lots of scriptures that speak of God testing or getting to know things (e.g., Ps 139) or being surprised (e.g., Isa 5:1-7), which make it clear that God does not know everything. It is much harder to find scriptures that imply that God does know everything. The idea that God knows everything is one we bring to scripture from Greek thinking, which we have to let scripture correct. I assume that God *could* know everything, and often chooses to know things supernaturally, but often chooses not to, so that our relationship with God is more real.

Is it a threatening idea that God changes his mind about things?

\*\*I think it’s encouraging, because Scripture only describes God as changing his mind in your favor, not against you! It means prayer can make a difference. It doesn’t mean God changes his nature or is fickle.

Did Jacob wrestle with God or with an angel? Was he literally wrestling or wrestling within himself as we all do? If it was God, why didn’t he prevail? And why was God wrestling Jacob anyway? If it wasn’t God, why would Jacob have asked for and received his blessing? Why did he strike him on the hip?

How does Jacob’s personality toward God and others change after wrestling with God? What might the story tells us about our own relationship with God?

\*\*The story says a person wrestled with him and then implies that this human-like figure was God. God has been trying various ways of getting through to Jacob, and failing, so here is another one... Disjointing his hip is another way of trying to get through. There is no indication Jacob was wrestling with himself. Often God declines to prevail. Indeed, God is declining to prevail all through the OT, and then especially in letting people crucify him, and then all through the history of the church. He was wrestling with Jacob for the same reason as he wrestled with Israel and with the church and with us - trying to get us to yield to him. After all, this is Jacob = Israel that we are talking about! To judge from the continuing story, Jacob didn’t change as a result.

*The number of wives, servant girls, and concubines that the men had is disturbing. I understand from Genesis 1-2 that God created the order to be one man with one woman, yet why is he so silent when it comes to these men’s marriage and sexual patterns? Why doesn’t he rebuke people more? Perhaps God is silent, yet we see that the natural consequences of these patterns end up being more pain.*

*\*\**There are few comments on the right and wrong of what people do in Genesis. As you imply, the stories speak for themselves. And the significance of them is partly the way God perseveres despite human sinfulness. Further, when God does speak, no one takes much notice, so what’s the point? After all, look at the church, look at all the things in the NT that are quite clear, but we take no notice! (But note that the relationships you refer to are generally ones that involve marriage—the women are secondary wives. The relationships imply polygamy not adultery, and polygamy is more like divorce and remarriage—it’s not an ideal but it’s not a sin, or not in the same sense.)

*It seems unfair that God blesses the chosen ones whether they behave honorably or not.*

*\*\**No, being fair doesn’t seem to be one of God’s priorities. So most people reading this document live in the West and are much better off than people in most countries in Africa, even though we are probably no more righteous. In the case of the chosen ones, the point lies in what God intends to achieve through them. Their blessing is for the sake of others. And I guess the same is true of us.

*It’s not fair that God stops Abimelek’s household from having children, because of Abraham*.

*\*\**I think the same applies, or the converse applies. God needs to preserve the potential mother of Abraham’s family. But at least it’s only a temporary disability.

*I am surprised that God did not directly punish some people as he did others and people in later contexts in the OT. Why was there such a period of non-punishment, full of promises and rewards?*

*\*\**Your last words make me wonder whether it again demonstrates that God’s working through this line of people is nothing to do with their deserve - the story shows that it is God’s grace that is at work. The contrast with later times is also interesting. I wonder whether it is something to do with the fact that God will then have acted to deliver them from Egypt, and has higher expectations?

I think it is puzzling that God put up with Abraham’s and Isaac’s deception and yet blessed

them. I think it is puzzling that God allowed the lying, deceiving and undermining behaviors without consequences.

\*\*The Bible portrays God as pursuing a purpose despite human sinfulness. God did once act in cataclysmic judgment but Genesis then reflects that it would be no use God continually doing this - God has to come to terms with human sinfulness (Gen 8:21). It's odd that we are discussing why God is not more judgmental when people often think the OT God is being wrathful all the time! God is evidently more merciful than we wish!

*What I find puzzling about other races in this section of the Bible is the tension between God loving and caring for the entire world, yet having a special concern for the people of Israel. How does this work? Does God love Israel more than others, or just differently?*

*\*\**The promise in Genesis 12 implies that God loves Israel for the sake of the world - it is God’s way of reaching the world. It is not designed to exclude the world. It is the same as the fact that God love us as Christians, God chose us from the world to come to know Christ, God has a special concern for us - but that is because God wants to reach the world through us.

*God has relationships with people outside of Israel, even though they are not part of God’s covenant with Israel. Is Israel the only nation with whom God made a covenant? If the Muslim people are the descendents of Ishmael as they claim, does the narrative of God’s continued provision and protection and blessing of them challenge the way we, as God’s people, view them and relate to them?*

*Should the promises to Hagar and Abraham about Ishmael be seen as another covenant?*

\*\*Genesis 17 is ambiguous about whether it’s a covenant but certainly God makes promises to Ishmael as well as Isaac, so we should indeed view the Arab peoples as within God’s commitment to Abraham.

*God states in 17:19 that the covenant will be established with Isaac and his descendants, and yet the covenant ends up only passing to Jacob. Why not Esau as well and have two tribes? Why wouldn’t laws protect the estate from trickery such as this? Is this to show that God does not adhere to human laws, such as the rights of the firstborn? Or is it to simply show that God can take a deceiver and still be faithful to the covenant?*

*\*\**I guess the implication is that Esau and his descendants are within the covenant—more explicitly than Ishmael and his descendants. So maybe we should look at them the same way as the Ishmaelites. The reason for the narrowing is indeed the principle that being born first does not count in God’s purpose in the way it does in human reckoning, where the firstborn has special rights. So the “preference” of Jacob over Esau is not to do with deserve or “salvation” but to God working out his purpose. The fact that Jacob is a nastier person than Esau helps to make the point. One can see an analogy in the way God chooses the nastiest persecutor and turns him into an apostle. Interestingly, the Edomites became the Idumeans and they were swallowed up into the Jewish people in late OT times—I don’t know what to make of that fact!

*What do election and being chosen by God look like now in light of Christ? Has God chosen all people in Christ, and now it’s up to us to respond? Does God still just choose some people?*

\*\*I think NT and OT talk the same way. God chose a people (Israel, then the expanded Israel that is the church) to be in a relationship with him, in order that God can thereby reach the world through them and bring the world into relationship with him (so election is inclusivizing not exclusive). Israel and the church are still God’s chosen people(s). God also chose individuals (Abraham, Paul) to particular roles. Perhaps God still does that. I don’t think scripture talks much if at all in terms of the election of us all as individuals to eternal life, does it? I don’t think scripture talks in terms of God choosing all people – that’s not choice, is? (Jesus does say that many are called but few are chosen?) There is a tension between God’s election and our response, but it’s important not to resolve that in such a way as to make our response the decisive thing.

*It still bothers me that God loves Jacob and hates Esau without seeming to have a reason. Esau isn’t perfect but he seems to be a better guy than Jacob. I know God is not choosing based on merit, but it just seems to be so unfair.*

\*\*Does it help if you see this love/hatred in terms of choice to a role (see previous question)? It is saying nothing about whether you will meet them in heaven. And remember that Jesus says you have to hate your parents. By loving and hating, God and Jesus are talking about priorities.

*Overall it seems that those who are not of the “chosen line” are disregarded in the stories in Genesis and left out of the blessings and inheritance. They are often treated poorly by the chosen people but God still has mercy on them and blesses them. God loves all humanity even though he makes a covenant only with a certain race. Why are people left out? Why would God chose to make a covenant with only the “chosen line” and not with all of humanity?*

*\*\**The choosing and leaving out link with God’s purpose to reach all peoples. God tried making a covenant with all humanity in Genesis 1—11 and it didn’t work. So now God is trying a different way. Of course that didn’t work very well either, so God narrowed down the chosen people to one man, and he was really faithful, so they killed him, but God raised him from the dead, and that still hasn’t worked very brilliantly.

*I don’t understand about brother-in-law marriage (Gen 38)*

*\*\**It’s a common practice in traditional peoples. When a man dies and the marriage was childless, the man’s brother is expected to marry his widow so that she gets looked after, and so that she may have children and there is someone to inherit the family land. In this connection the first child born will count as the dead man’s, so that the brother may only lose through observing the practice—it costs him to take on this extra wife, and he gets nothing out of it (there is no compulsion on the widow to undertake the marriage). Evidently God strongly disapproves of Onan’s refusal to act in this way. In the context, part of the story’s point is the contrast with the Joseph story, which this story “interrupts.” Judah is such a contrast with Joseph. And this story is being told in a context where Judah is the leading clan, David’s clan, Solomon’s clan...

*It seems that God has some standard for his creation to live by but he does not inform them of that standard. He just gets angry/frustrated when they live contrary to it (but pleased with offerings and altars).*

*\*\**The Bible assumes that God has written into humanity’s nature an awareness of God and of the basics of right and wrong. The people in Sodom or the Canaanites/Amorites (Gen 15:16) don’t need to be told that aspects of their lifestyle are terribly wrong.

*Will Melchizedek (Gen 14) be saved? Will the people who died in Sodom be saved?*

*\*\**By saved you mean enjoy eternal life? If they were people who had trusted in God, yes. If not, no.

*How does God interact with other nations in order for Israel to be a blessing? I think I’m still confused as to how Israel was supposed to be a light to the nations, or how God cares for other nations. There’s no effort to bring the other nations to know Yahweh. Can Canaanites ever be blessed?*

*\*\**If you mean Abraham and his family make no effort, you’re right—they are not called to do so. Their job is to watch God do the thing Genesis 12:1-3 promises, because that’s God’s way of bringing other nations to know God and to find blessing. That’s the way they will be the means of light coming to the nations.

*When God interacts in the lives of the chosen people the person always seems to have their life ruined. In the Joseph story, he is put through hell but Pharaoh just seems to profit from his presence. Jokingly I would ask what is really better having God in our lives or not. It seems like God cursed the chosen people to be a blessing for those outside the covenant. Like Jesus became a curse for us. What kind of scary implications does this have for our lives?*

*\*\**I’d say you exaggerate more than somewhat. While Joseph has a tough time, it hardly applies to everyone (e.g., Abraham). As you imply, being part of God’s people means taking up your cross and following him. So yes, it has scary implications.

*When Rachel stole her father’s idols, what is the purpose in mentioning this action? The theft is never resolved. We do not know what happen to the idols. We do not know if Jacob ever found out about the idols. And we do not know God’s response to Rachel for stealing the idols.*

*\*\**Perhaps it’s an example of how deception characterizes this dysfunctional family.

*I am puzzled by the women’s lack of communication with God. God speaks to the men, but rarely do you see the women communicating with God one on one.*

*\*\**I guess that’s part of the androcentric (man-centered) nature of the scripture writers, which God chose not to do anything about. It doesn’t mean women weren’t communicating with God - it means that the story focuses on what it sees as the key elements in the story, God working through people such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. There is something similar about Jesus. He chooses only men to be among the Twelve Disciples, but it doesn’t mean he and God aren’t relating to the women who follow him.

*What is the concept of Sheol found in Jacob’s words in 37:35 and 42:38? Does the Torah operate with an assumption of an afterlife? If not, are there any indirect observations we can make about an afterlife? What was the typical understanding of afterlife in ancient Mesopotamia?*

*\*\**Genesis doesn’t actually mention Sheol but I assume you are right that it has the same understanding of Sheol/Hades that you get elsewhere in OT and NT and in Mesopotamia—when we die we all go to the same place, which is not a place of punishment, just a place where it’s like an endless doze. Of course Jesus’ death and resurrection will change that for Jacob as for us!

*I find it puzzling how Joseph was able to maintain such a strong faith in God despite him never encountering God as his forefathers did.*

*\*\**Yes, it’s interesting—indeed his faith and hope and love are much stronger than theirs. It shows that having God appear to you and speak to you aren’t the decisive factors.

*I find it puzzling that God used Joseph to save Israel and his family, but he also in a sense used Joseph to create a very oppressive system for the people of Egypt and the rest of the world where basically Pharaoh owned them and controlled their land. Why did God do that? It almost looks like God caused the oppression through Joseph’s shrewdness.*

*\*\**Well, it doesn’t quite say that God used Joseph to create that oppressive system, though it does indicate that God made this possible and didn’t stop him. But by now we know that none of the great heroes of Genesis is perfect...

*When and how do the families’ sin patterns stop in Scripture? Perhaps because I see the repetition of their behavior, it seems to pain a grim picture of what families are like. I am sure that I am missing pieces in my understanding and perspective on the families in Genesis, but what are they? Are there positive examples of families who break negative familial patterns? Do we look to models for family in Genesis or look for the presence of God in these imperfect families?*

*\*\**That’s a great way to put the question, and the second is surely the answer!

I find the concept of womanhood in Genesis puzzling and it raises the issue of cultural biases in the writing of these Scriptures. Were these Scriptures written in a patriarchal culture that would naturally portray women in a negative light? How do we discern God’s truth in light of that kind of question or observation? What is God’s view of women? How are women in today’s society, in light of how Jesus engaged with women in the NT, supposed to interpret these OT stories?

\*\*I’m puzzled that you say Genesis portrays women in a negative light. I would have thought it portrays men in just as negative a light. God's design for womanhood is indicated by the creation stories. As Jesus points out, they express God's vision. What follows takes account of human "hardness of heart" (Mark 10), which includes patriarchy. Polygamy is not accepted in the sense of being regarded as just fine - the stories show ways in which it causes trouble. But it is accepted as a reality. Jesus likewise operates in light of cultural biases—he includes only men in his Twelve Disciples. We have to see the question of cultural bias both ways. We have our cultural bias about this being a really important question. God apparently thinks there are bigger questions.

There is one text that is particularly disturbing in its treatment of women, namely, the text in which Lot offers his daughters to the men of Sodom to be violated in place of the guests who have come into his home. While a study of ancient customs of hospitality might shed some light on why it would have been particularly important to guard the honor of the guests, it is nonetheless difficult to see Lot’s offer as anything other than reprehensible… One might argue that, while it is true that no moral judgment is made by the authors about Lot’s actions, this is consistent with the character of the Genesis narrative as a whole, which consists primarily of bare narrative absent any moral commentary. Such attempts at mitigation notwithstanding, this text remains problematic, and one wonders whether such a story can truly be retrieved and reread in such a way that it does not denigrate women, but testifies to God’s desire that all persons, both male and female, be duly honored as bearers of the divine image in the world.

\*\*Yes, it’s a truly horrible story. But I am not sure why you think the story is problematic. If the Bible did not include any such stories about the kind of thing that happens to women, surely that would make the situation much worse? Then it would be harder to “retrieve” the Genesis stories. A great thing about them is that they portray life as it really is, and then portray God at work in such a world (not least in bringing judgment on a city like Sodom). One great thing about these stories being in scripture is that they give us the opportunity to discuss the reality of patriarchy, deception, abuse, etc. Of course actually we don't have that discussion!

*If the stories are not just for moral edification then what are they for?*

*\*\**Theological edification! They tell us what people are right and what God set about doing about it.

What impact that was made upon Isaac based upon his father’s attempt to sacrifice him to God? This certainly would have had a huge impact on the development of a young man and I would have been interested if there was anything within the account of Isaac that emphasizes a different outlook on God relative to the outlook expressed by Abraham.

\*\*There’s nothing. So that pushes us into asking what the story is interested in.

*I think that one thing that has always bothered me was the way in which Yahweh’s interactions with his people are recorded. They are written as if God is speaking directly to leaders and people in tangible ways.  Anytime it says “Yahweh says,” I don’t know how to understand how that saying occurs. If it is as simple as the language in the text suggests, then why does it seem God doesn’t now speak with that kind of direct clarity? Is the problem in our culture or in our understanding of that literary element of dialogue in the text or is the problem in me?*

\*\*It’s an interesting question. It’s worth noting that God doesn’t speak all that often—once every decade or two?! I think you may be right that sometimes the Bible speaks metaphorically, as when we ourselves say “God has been telling me… ” On the other hand, there are stories in Scripture that presuppose an audible voice. I have never heard an audible voice, but I know people who say they have, and I don’t assume that they are all crazy.