The Book of Genesis Part III – Table of Contents (tentative)

Week 1: The Cast of Characters

Text Reading: Genesis 11:26 - 32

"This man, Abraham, was loved by God,
Who pronounced him righteous on the basis of his faith."
(Gunther Bornkamm)

The father of three world religions, Abraham is claimed as patriarch and prophet by Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Fully one quarter of the Book of Genesis is devoted to the narrative of Abraham's life, with particular attention to the covenant established by God between Himself and the patriarch of the Hebrew nation. In Abraham God begins to focus His redemptive plan to a people – though, of course, the Jew and the Christian and the Muslim do not agree as to the identity of that people in the world today. Yet adherents from all three religions would generally concur with Leon Kass, "Having dispersed mankind into many nations, He [*God*, of course] now chooses one nation to carry His way as a light unto all the others, and He takes up a prominent role as that nation's educator and guide."[1] This nation came from the loins of Abraham, and that by a nearly miraculous birth of a promised son when Abraham was very old, and his wife barren.

The Dispensationalist begins a new era of divine redemptive work with Abraham, breaking the continuity of faith with the previous 'dispensation' of Noah. Abraham inaugurates the 'Patriarchal Dispensation'; the fourth of seven in the classical enumeration, which will in turn give way to the 'Mosaic.' But the Reformed theologian sees in Abraham both the continuation and the epitome (at least in pre-Christian times) of God's covenantal dealings with mankind, and recognizes with the Apostle Paul that the Mosaic Era was but a way station along the road from Abraham to his Promised Seed, Jesus Christ.

In Second Temple rabbinic tradition, Father Abraham occupies the place held by Peter in the mythology of many Christian traditions. Abraham sits at the

[1] Kass, Leon *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York: Free Press; 2003); 247.

gate of Hell (*Gehenna*) and Heaven (*Paradise*), to determine who are true descendant of himself, and thus permitted to enter the place of bliss rather than to be consigned to the place of torment. 'Abraham's Bosom,' a common phrase in Second Temple Judaism, is recognized by Jesus Himself as the euphemism for Paradise, as the poor beggar Lazarus is carried thence by the angels in Jesus' story of Lazarus and the Rich Man.

> *Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.*
>
> (Luke 16:22-24)

Rabbi Levi, in the Midrash Genesis Rabba, accords Abraham a powerful role in judging who may and who may not enter into Paradise,

> R. Levi said: In the Hereafter Abraham will sit at the entrance to Gehenna, and permit no circumcised Israelite to descend therein. What then will he do to those who have sinned very much? He will remove the foreskin from babes who died before circumcision and set it upon them [the sinners], and then let them descend into Gehenna.[2]

Abraham figures remarkably in this particular work of rabbinic tradition; earlier the rabbis ponder the instability of Adam in comparison to their perception of Abraham's abiding and unfailing faith (a slight exaggeration of the patriarch's actual life, to be sure). Genesis Rabbah 14 states,

> Perhaps in the proper order of things, Abraham should have been the first man created, not Adam. God, however, foresaw the fall of the first man, and if Abraham had been the first man and had fallen, there would have been no one after him to restore righteousness to the world; whereas after Adam's fall came Abraham, who established in the world the knowledge of God. As a builder puts the strongest beam in the centre of the building, so as to support the structure at

[2] Midrash Rabbah Genesis XLIII;
http://archive.org/stream/RabbaGenesis/midrashrabbahgen027557mbp_djvu.txt

> both ends, so Abraham was the strong beam carrying the burden of the generations that existed before him and that came after him.[3]

In Islam, no less than in Judaism and Christianity, Abraham is a hero of the faith. He is one of the seven major prophets of Islam, and he is also a 'messenger' and an 'imam.' This role he shares with only four other prophets of the Islamic faith – Adam, Noah, Moses, Jesus, and, of course, Muhammad. A 'messenger' in Islam is a prophet who is also tasked with bringing *Shariah* to the people of the earth – 'divine law.' Thus a 'messenger' is also a lawgiver. An 'imam' has the further responsibility of teaching the people the truth about God, and leading them in worship. To the Muslim, Abraham (Ibrahim) was all three – prophet, messenger, and imam.

Such a central figure within the cultural and religious framework of three major world religions, yet Abraham is widely considered by modern scholars to be a mythological or legendary character concocted by later Hebrews fabricating their national 'pre-history.' It is somewhat remarkable what these rationalistic, critical writers have to say about Abraham – often evidencing a complete lack of familiarity with the biblical text. For instance, Charles Foster Kent, in his multi-volume history of the Jewish nation, writes.

> Standing as the traditional father of the race among the mists of dim antiquity, it was inevitable that the character of Abraham should be idealized. In the stories which they have preserved each group of biblical writers has sketched its ideal. In the Judean prophetic narratives Abraham is the friend of God, the man of perfect faith who in a cruel, selfish, warring age lived at peace with all men…In the Ephraimite narratives he is called and is pictured as a prophet, in dreams foreseeing the future, intent only upon carrying out the divine command, even though it cost him his dearest possession.[4]

But these are not accurate descriptions of the man portrayed in the Genesis narratives – regardless of who one believes actually wrote the narratives

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[3] *Ibid.*

[4] Kent, Charles Foster *Narrative of the Beginnings of Hebrew History* (London: Hodder & Stoughton; 1904); 73.

(and Kent adheres to the Wellhausean theory of multiple late authors of the Pentateuch). Abraham was *not* a man of steadfast faith throughout his life (case in point, his dalliance with Hagar that produced Ishmael), nor was he at all times peace-loving (his household entourage constituted a small army). He attempted to pass off his wife as his sister - not once, but twice – in a craven attempt to preserve his own life. Contrary to legendary embellishments – both real and perceived – the biblical presentation of the patriarchs comes complete with warts. The failures of the patriarchs, both in character and action, are not hidden from view nor glossed over. If there is a single thread of theology apparent through the narratives of the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (and especially the first and third of this triumvirate), it is that of *sovereign grace*.

The Benefit of the Doubt:

But was Abraham a real person? It is true that his life setting resides in 'the mists of dim antiquity,' and that the narratives of his comings and goings were written down centuries after his death. Even as we accept the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, we recognize that Moses lived half a millennium after Abraham, a very long time indeed to keep a story straight. There is no way of proving indisputably that Abraham and his heirs were real figures in ancient Hebrew history, but there are several features of the ancient record that favor a literal reading of the narratives concerning their existence and their lives. Emmanuel Anati, in his *Palestine Before the Hebrews*, hedges his bets,

> According to the Biblical accounts, the three central figures of Patriarchal times were Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They have been considered by some scholar to be actual historical figures; by other, dynasties or ruling families. In my view they were individuals – powerful, half-legendary figures who led the Hebrew tribe. Probably they were not its only leaders, but the names of no other such outstanding figures have reached us.[5]

[5] Anati, Emmanuel *Palestine Before the Hebrews: A History, from the Earliest Arrival of Man to the Conquest of Canaan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf; 1963); 389.

Without firm documentary proof of the real, historical existence of Abraham, how do we establish the validity of the biblical account of his life? We hold, of course, to the inspiration of the Scriptures and recognize the centrality of the person of Abraham to the overall redemptive plan and history of God and of His people. In this the evangelical stands firmly on the historical validity of the narratives, and does not work from a position of critical doubt to a position of faith. Rather he stands firm in faith, and then discerns the critical evidence that bolsters that faith.

For example, there is the universality of Abrahamic literature in the ancient Near Eastern world. We have already seen that the patriarch is a key figure in the three major religions that grew from that region of the globe. But it must be admitted that of these three, two are relatively late-comers on the historical scene: Christianity in the first century, and Islam in the sixth and seventh centuries. Yet there are literary references to Abraham that predate the Christian Era. For instance, there is an ancient Syrian text that alleges this same Abraham as having once been the king of Damascus, though he was a foreigner to the city.[6] To be sure, it is very difficult to sift the historical from the legendary with regard to the life of Abraham, in all sources outside the Bible. Yet the presence even of legendary materials, alongside those that purport to be straightforward historical accounts (such as the Genesis narratives), lends credence to the existence of Abraham as a real historical figure in the Ancient Near Eastern world.

Another supporting factor in the critical analysis of the historicity of Abraham comes from the relatively modern science of Archaeology. We will have more to say on this topic in our second session, as we set forth the stage on which the patriarchal narratives are played out in Ur, and Haran, in Shechem,

[6] Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*; I.7.3. Josephus references the historian Nicolaus of Damascus (born c. 64 BC) who was himself quoting earlier tradition.

the Negev, and Egypt. Suffice it to say at this juncture that the archaeological discoveries made over the past two hundred years, have served to corroborate the biblical account in a remarkable manner. What is stunning is that the biblical account depicts situations, people groups, cities, and even manners of livelihood that were *not current* when the narratives were written – whether the scholar accepts Mosaic authorship or, with the school of Wellhausen, places Pentateuchal authorship many centuries later than Moses. Places like Goshen, in Egypt, and pharaohs amenable to Semitic peoples, did not exist in Moses' day, or later. In many individual points, the situations or places described in the Genesis patriarchal narratives would have been completely foreign to the people of Moses' day, but have in modern times been entirely validated by archaeological discoveries of a time many centuries prior to Moses.

While this sort of corroborative date does not prove the historical existence of Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, it does establish the historicity of the narratives themselves in terms of places, people groups, and manners of life and occupation. It is widely regarded, even among liberal critics of the biblical accounts, that the history of the pre-Mosaic world is accurately depicted in the Genesis narratives. It is reasonable that the author – who got the cities and peoples right, though he would not have had firsthand knowledge of either – also recorded the historical personages correctly. A principle of literary criticism, known as 'Aristotle's Dictim,' states that the benefit of the doubt ought always be given to the text under investigation. Archaeological evidence certainly justifies giving the benefit of any doubt regarding the historicity of the patriarchal accounts to the Genesis narratives.

The Family of Terah:

The biblical narrative regarding Abraham stretches from the closing verses of Genesis 11, through to the patriarch's death in Chapter 25. The narrative is built along the lines of events in the life of Abraham, and the cast of

characters as well as the geography of the events remains fairly constant throughout. Therefore we will begin in this session with building the cast of characters, and in the next session draw out the geography and archaeology of the stage on which Abraham lived.

Abraham himself is presented as the tenth generation from Noah, a similarity that may be literal or may be literary. Note that the genealogy that ended with Noah developed into three sons – Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Similarly, the genealogy that ends with Terah also develops in three sons – Abram, Nahor, and Haran. While this is quite likely a stylistic feature in the writing, this by no means necessitates that the genealogies are non-historical. Most ancient literature originated as oral tradition – and certainly the stories pertaining to the Hebrew patriarchs were passed down by memory from generation to generation long before they were committed to writing by Moses. Such stylistic features served as an aid to memory; they were the literary framework of odes and epics, which actually better preserved the historicity of the narrative rather than diminish it.

The family of Terah is somewhat difficult to sort out with any definiteness, especially as it pertains to the familial relationship between Abraham and his wife, Sarah (more on that below). There are some things that we can piece together with fair confidence. First, Haran – Terah's son (we cannot tell the order of birth by the order of listing, as we saw earlier with Noah's sons – dies before his father. Literally, Haran died *"in the face of his father"* or in his father's presence. In the Ancient Near East it was considered a curse for a son to predecease his father; it was a sign of divine disfavor. The exception would be, of course, if a man met a violent end either in war or by murder (the theory posited earlier regarding the death of Lamech before his father, Methuselah).

The ancient Semitic tradition (also shared by other traditions around the world) was that when a man died, his brother would assume his role both as husband to his widow and father to his children. In the case of Haran, we read

nothing of Haran's widow, but it becomes quickly apparent that Abram/Abraham assumes the role of father to Haran's son, Lot. This is an important fact to remember when we come to consider just who Abraham's wife, Sarah, was in relationship to the patriarch.

A little known feature of the narrative is that the migratory life of Abram did not begin with his own call to leave Ur of the Chaldeans, but rather with his father Terah taking his family and departing from their ancestral home.

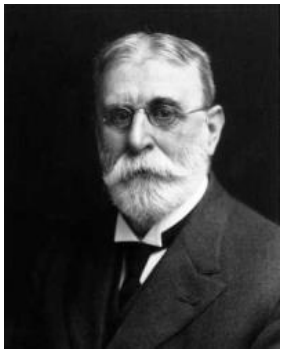
> *And Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chadeans in order to enter the land of Canaan; and they went as far as Haran, and settled there.* (Genesis 11:31)

Terah, not Abram, was the first to determine to go to Canaan. Jewish tradition has clouded and embellished this part of the narrative, making the cause of the migration the persecution of Abram by the Chaldeans on account of his monotheism. Josephus records the tradition of Abram's piety and self-discovery of monotheism, as well as the ancient tradition that Abram was an astronomer no less than a theologian. In his commentary, however, Josephus conveniently forgets to mention the role of Terah in regard to the first migration of Abram's family.

> Now Abram, having no son of his own, adopted Lot, his brother Haran's son, and his wife Sarai's brother; and he left the land of Chaldea when he was seventy-five years old, and at the command of God went into Canaan, and therein he dwelt himself, and left it to his posterity. He was a person of great sagacity, both for understanding all things and persuading his hearers, and not mistaken in his opinions; for which reason he began to have higher notions of virtue than others had, and he determined to renew and to change the opinion all men happened then to have concerning God; for he was the first that ventured to publish this notion, That there was but one God, the Creator of the universe; and that, as to other [gods], if they contributed any thing to the happiness of men, that each of them afforded it only according to his appointment, and not by their own power. This his opinion was derived from the irregular phenomena that were visible both at land and sea, as well as those that happen to the sun, and

> moon, and all the heavenly bodies, thus: - "If [said he] these bodies had power of their own, they would certainly take care of their own regular motions; but since they do not preserve such regularity, they make it plain, that in so far as they co-operate to our advantage, they do it not of their own abilities, but as they are subservient to Him that commands them, to whom alone we ought justly to offer our honor and thanksgiving." For which doctrines, when the Chaldeans, and other people of Mesopotamia, raised a tumult against him, he thought fit to leave that country; and at the command and by the assistance of God, he came and lived in the land of Canaan. And when he was there settled, he built an altar, and performed a sacrifice to God.[7]

Other Jewish commentators pontificate on how Abraham introduced astronomy into Egypt during his sojourn there with Sarai, his wife, though not a shred of evidence of this can be gleaned from the biblical account. Warfield, however, offers a more sober and more biblically accurate portrait of Abraham, "He was not a great thinker, in the powerful solvent of whose thought old faiths dissolved and their purer elements crystallized into higher forms."[8] Indeed, Joshua's testimony concerning the family of Terah brings into doubt Abram's native piety and alleged enlightenment concerning the one, true God. In a statement that no doubt includes the son as well as the father, Joshua claims that the family of Terah were pagan idolaters in their dwelling 'beyond the River.'



B. B. Warfield (1851-1921)

> *Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and called for the elders of Israel and for their heads and their judges and their officers; and they presented themselves before God. Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'From ancient times your fathers lived beyond the River, namely, Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, and they served other gods.* (Joshua 24:1-2)

We are not told what motivated Terah to begin the trek from the land of the Chaldeans to the land of Canaan, though we are told that he did not make

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[7] Josephus, *Antiquities* I.7.1. The proto-martyr Stephen narrates a similar account to that of Josephus, in Acts 7:2-4.

[8] Meeter, John E.; ed. *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield: Volume II* (Plilipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company; 1973); 686.

the entire journey, but stopped and settled in Haran. The fact that the city of his sojourn happens to bear the same name as his deceased son is coincidental; the name Haran or its various derivatives was somewhat common, as was the practice of naming a city after one's son. It is not necessary to conclude that Terah names the city after his lost son, especially as the narrative clearly has Terah bringing his family to a city already well established (a fact that archaeology confirms). We are left in the dark concerning Terah's motives, and whether the call to depart from Ur was first given to Abram and seconded by his father (an unusual order of things). We do not know if Terah was restored to a true knowledge of God handed down from Noah, or if he remained an idolater to his death. It is significant that Abram's brother – Terah's remaining living son – Nahor, remained in Ur and did not accompany his father and brother on their journey west.

Wife and Sister:

Terah's entourage consisted of himself, his son Abram, Abram's wife Sarai, and Terah's grandson, Lot, the son of the deceased Haran. It is evident from the narrative, and from other passages, that Lot was Abram's nephew and ward, which was in keeping with the kinsman redemption tradition common among ancient Semitic peoples. What is not so clear is the familial relationship of Sarai to Abram, her husband. Genesis 11:29 provides us with the names of the wives of both Nahor and Abram – an unusual detail in the biblical narratives. Abram married Sarai and Nahor married Milcah, who was the daughter of Haran. Another is named: Iscah, a second daughter of Haran. But there is no context for the naming of Iscah, and the name does not occur again in the patriarchal narratives.

What makes the situation complicated is the explanation Abraham later gives to Abimelech regarding his assertion that Sarah was indeed his sister and not just his wife (Abraham's behavior in the two accounts involving Pharaoh of

Egypt and Abimelech of Gerar, will require careful attention in a later session!). When Abimelech is informed in a dream of Sarah's true identity, he confronts Abraham with the patriarch's subterfuge. Abraham responds,

> *Because I thought, surely there is no fear of God in this place; and they will kill me because of my wife. Besides, she actually is my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife.* (Genesis 20:11-12)

We begin our attempt to sort out this conundrum by noting that Jewish rabbinic tradition from ancient times held that Sarai and Iscah were one and the same person. Indeed, 'Sarai' is not so much a name as it is a title: *My Princess.* Arthur Custance writes, "In Hebrew the word for prince is *Sar*, the feminine form of which is *Sara*, meaning 'princess.' The terminal possessive pronoun *my* is a long *i* so that Sara become Sarai meaning, 'my princess.' This is how Abraham referred to his beautiful wife. Her name was Iscah, but he called her 'My Princess' or Sarai."[9] If this is the case (and it would at least help us understand why Iscah is mentioned in Genesis 11:29…and no where else), then it would appear that Nahor and Abram married their nieces. This would not be uncommon in the ancient world, but it does not solve the mystery of Genesis 20:12. How can Terah be considered Sarah's *father* when he was, in fact, her *grandfather*? Abraham's description of his relationship to Sarah does not allow for the more generic usage of the term 'father,' whereby it often includes such as a grandfather or even just a predecessor in a particular office or rank. No, Sarah is "*the daughter of my father, though she is not the daughter of my mother.*" Either Abraham is being purposely confusing, or there is another explanation of his relationship to Sarah/Iscah.

[9] Custance, Arthur *Hidden Things of God's Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan;1976); 156.

Parallel and Cross Cousins:

A common feature in both ancient and modern Semitic peoples, as well as in other cultural traditions including Native American, the favored marital unions were made between *parallel* cousins – the children of your father's brothers (or of your sister's sisters – same sex siblings). *Cross* cousins are the children of your mother's brothers or your father's sisters (opposite sex siblings) and, while still common in Semitic marriage arrangements, these were not the preferred pairings. When we reconsider the way that Genesis 11:27-29 are written, it does seem unusual the way that Haran is listed as the father of Lot in verse 27, and then as the father of Milcah and Iscah in verse 29. What is particularly odd about the phrasing is that Haran is mentioned as the father of the two women *after* his death is noted in verse 28. Furthermore, Lot's relationship to Terah's son Haran is confirmed in verse 31, where he is called the grandson of Terah, whereas nothing is said of Sarai except that she was Terah's daughter-in-law.

There is a circumstance in which all of the various comments that are made concerning Sarai/Iscah would make sense, though it necessitates an assumption that is by no means clear in the text. If the Haran mentioned in verse 29 is not the same as the Haran in verse 27 – indeed, if this second Haran is, in fact, Terah's *brother* and not his son – then we would have what would be a very common occurrence in the Ancient Near East, especially among the Semitic peoples. This theory would require that Terah's brother Haran would also predecease Terah (just like his son Haran does…but the double or triple occurrence of very similar events is not unheard of in the patriarchal narratives). If this were the case, then by the tradition of kinsman redemption, Terah would become the husband of Haran's widow and the father of Haran's children. Indeed, if Haran died before Sarai was born, she would most literally be the daughter of Abraham's father though not the daughter of his mother. She would

also be Abraham's *parallel* cousin, as Milcah would be to Nahor, and as such would be a preferred match in marriage.

It must be noted that this view, while supported by some Jewish tradition and corroborated by ancient practices, cannot be definitively proven on the basis of the biblical narrative. It does, however, provide a plausible genealogy of the family of Terah (and of his father Nahor who, by the way, was the namesake for Terah's son, showing the common usage of certain names within a family) that corresponds exactly with what Abraham later says about his wife/sister, Sarah.

Thus far the family of Terah, being Abram/Abraham's closest generational relatives. Of the patriarch's own family – including his sons by Hagar, Sarah, and Keturah – we will have more to say in a later session. This partial cast of characters will, however, take us through the first half of the narrative devoted to Abraham in the Book of Genesis.

Abraham and the Covenant with God:

Gerhard von Rad notes that *theology* is not to be found on the surface of the patriarchal narratives in Genesis. He writes, "All who read the stories of the patriarchs with an eye to their theology will soon see that it is not easy to give an answer to the question so self-evident to us, what is their meaning, their theological content?"[10] There are certainly sections of the patriarchal narratives that leave us wondering, 'Why was that included?' 'What am I to glean from this story?' Any attempt to treat the patriarchal narratives as systematic theology will end in utter failure, or worse, false theology. We are reading the revelation of God and of His redemptive plan, through the lives of historical persons in the midst of a world of pagan rebellions against God. There *is* theology to be found; it just is not systematic and easy to find.

If one were to choose one, or a few, theological *threads* that run through the patriarchal narratives, certainly the *covenant* would have to be on the list.

[10] Von Rad, Gerhard *Old Testament Theology: Volume I* (New York: Harper & Row; 1962); 165.

There is also the *Seed* narrative that continues through especially the early Abrahamic narratives, beginning as we have seen all the way back in Genesis 3;15. *Promise* is undoubtedly an important theological feature of these narratives from Genesis 12 to the end of the book, as is the *possession of the land* that formed such an integral part of the promise. We have also mentioned the pervasive theme and evidence of God's *sovereignty* through these narratives as well. As we traverse the life of Abraham, we will have many occasions to move ahead to the New Testament, and then to look back again at the events recorded in Genesis 12 – 25. We must rely to a large extent on the later teachings of Scripture, if we are to properly interpret the theology of the patriarchal narratives.

Within Reformed theological circles, however, there is perhaps no more important theological feature of the Abrahamic story than that of the covenant. In this, Reformed theology does follow the Apostle Paul, who makes a great deal of the Abrahamic Covenant in his letters, especially his Epistle to the Galatians. But the Reformed treatment of the Abrahamic Covenant has, to those of the baptistic orientation, a sinister twist. That is, of course, the substitution of baptism for circumcision as the 'sign' of the New Covenant, and consequently its application to infants. A study of the life of Abraham will provide the forum in which to investigate this perennial stumbling block between evangelicals who are otherwise in fairly consistent doctrinal uniformity. Fortunately, the multifaceted nature of the patriarchal narratives – the varied events through which God revealed Himself in ever-increasing fullness to Abraham, and later Isaac and Jacob – will keep the student from camping for too long on just one issue, that of infant baptism.

Finally, from the perspective of a theological introduction to the study of Abraham and the Abrahamic Covenant, it will be important that this analysis seeks to find the proper, biblical relationship between the *Abrahamic* and the *Mosaic* covenants, as Paul seeks to do in Galatians. As the revelation of God is progressive, and as it comes to us mediated through the historical lives and

events of men, we are constantly challenged to the Continuity/Discontinuity paradigm. We may and must see the formation of the nation of Israel, and the giving of the Law through Moses, as fulfillment – at least in measure – of the promises given to Abraham. But it is evident from Paul's writings that he, at least, did not consider the coming of the Law through Moses to in any way abrogate the covenant established in Abraham.

> *What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise.*
>
> (Galatians 3:17)

Thus we embark on a theological commentary of the first patriarchal narrative: the life of Abraham. The biographical data, the geographical setting, the interactions between the patriarch and Jehovah God, weave together to present a mosaic of revelation that itself becomes the very fabric of biblical soteriology – the Doctrine of Salvation. After Jesus Christ, it is hard to imagine a more important person in the whole of Scripture than 'Father Abraham.'

Week 2: The Setting – The Ancient Near East

Text Reading: Acts 7:2 – 7; 14:16

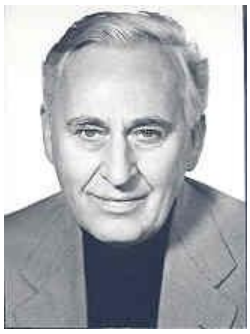
"Every tell is the same as a silent history book.
Its strata are for the archaeologist as the leaves of a calendar."
(Werner Keller)

Time, Place, and People. The unfolding of God's revelation of both Himself and His redemptive plan for sinful man, comes to us not in a systematic treatise complete with Table of Contents and alphabetical Index. It is woven in the stories of men and women who lived in time and space, occupying a portion of this world's history and geography. And the times and the places in which these people lived were themselves aspects of God's self-disclosure, for it is Divine Providence that brings forth an Abram *"for just such a time as this."* The land from which Abram came, and the land to which he journeyed – and the land to which he ventured when in doubt and distress – all play an important part in our understanding of the message that is contained in the fabric of the patriarchal narratives. Thus the field of Biblical Archaeology has made a tremendous contribution to our understanding of the ancient text; history and character study that this text is, it requires a setting in both time and place.

When did Abram/Abraham live? We saw in the last lesson that the peoples and places we encounter in the patriarchal narratives are not people or places that would have been current in the days of Moses or later. Until the science of Archaeology was developed in the late eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries, liberal scholars were convinced (and quite convincing) that the places and peoples names in the ancient text were no more than mythological inventions of a later writer's active imagination.[11] During the course of seventy-five to one hundred years – from the middle of the nineteenth into the early

[11] This remains a leading critique against the Book of Mormon, that the peoples and places mentioned in that book have never been known to either history or archeology.

decades of the twentieth centuries – archaeological discoveries brought to light and knowledge not only the places mentioned in the patriarchal narratives, but also a measure of their astounding grandeur. Of Abram, inhabitant of Ur of the Chaldeans, Werner Keller says, "Abraham – no simple nomad, this Abraham, but a son of a great city of the second millennium B.C."[12] But the great city of Ur was unknown to history for much of the three centuries that separated Abraham from modern biblical critics, and was thus relegated to the realm of mythology and legend. Indeed, when in the third century B.C., the translators of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek – the 'Seventy' whose number gave name to their translation, the Septuagint – came to the passages referring to Ur, they simply translated as 'land,' having no knowledge or recollection whatsoever of the ancient city.


Werner Keller (1909-80)

Even in the disappearance of ancient cities such as Ur we see the hand of God's providence at work. This is because the appearance and disappearance of cities – now being cataloged by archaeologists – provide brackets within which the events recorded in Scripture must have taken place. For instance, had Abram originated from Jerusalem, we would have a continuous dateline stretching from the third millennium B.C. through the era of Israel into the Second Temple Period and on to the present day. Jerusalem is one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world, and therefore affords no time markers that the historian or archaeologist may use to narrow in on the date of recorded events. Not so Ur of the Chaldeans – there was a time when this city was, and was great, and then there was a time when it was not. And the 'was not' was so complete that it took three thousand years to discover the traces of the ancient 'was.' Therefore we know that the timing of Abram has to be when Ur 'was,' and before it 'was not.'

Archaeology also provides a glimpse – albeit a very shadowy glimpse – into the culture of this ancient world in which Abram and Sarai and Lot lived

[12] Keller, Werner *The Bible as History* (New York: William Morrow and Company; 1956); 20.

and moved about. In the biblical text we meet with Canaanites and Egyptians, with Abimelech the king of Gezer, and with the petty kings of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim, and Melchizedek the king of Salem and priest of God Most High. While the names themselves have not appeared in the archaeological records – that would be asking a bit much of the ancient lens which is Archaeology – their kingdoms and peoples have largely come to light under the archaeologist's spade and brush, and a remarkable number of written texts have been discovered that lend great credence to the biblical account. The past two hundred years of archaeological research has settled the apologetical question as to the historicity of the patriarchal narratives, and the believer may now rest in his or her faith that the events recorded in the Book of Genesis did, in fact, happen in time and place.

Ur and Haran:

In the modern era, all that remained of the great city of Ur was the remains of a ziggurat, an example of the square tiered pyramids common in the Ancient Near East. The ziggurat was such a common feature in the landscape of ancient Mesopotamia – the "Land between the Rivers" Tigris and Euphrates – that they were not viewed as necessary harbingers of any great ancient city or civilization – they were largely viewed in the same light as their Egyptians cousins, the pyramids. The region around the ziggurat of Ur, though it was not known as such at the time, became a military base for the French, and later the British, during and after World War I, when the Middle East became the 'mandates' of these two European powers. It was a forsaken post in the midst of a harsh desert, with little to do and little danger other than the terrain, the weather, the random roaming band of Bedouins, and boredom. But the era of 'mandates' brought an increased interest in the Middle East from the students of antiquities in Britain,

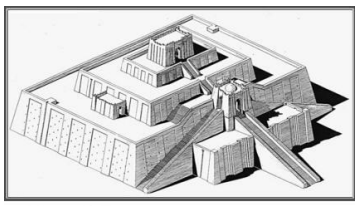


Fig. 1 Ziggurat at Ur

France, and Germany, and there was a corresponding impetus from biblical scholars to locate the long-forgotten places mentioned in the Bible.

One of the most famous of the archaeologists who would travel back and forth from Europe to Egypt, from Europe to Persia, and from Europe to Palestine, was the Brit Sir Charles Leonard Woolley. It was Woolley who brought Ur to view, during a series of archaeological expeditions between 1922 and 1934. The discovery was electrifying for the archaeological world, and possessed much of the same celebrity value among common citizens as that of the discovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb in Egypt at about the same time. Ur was found not only to have been a real place, but to have been a city of unparalleled grandeur in the ancient world. The name 'Ur' was discovered to be that of one of the city's most illustrious rulers, Ur-Nammu, who began the construction of the great ziggurat that dominated the city's skyline. Ur-Nammu was a successful warrior, the writer of a law code, and apparently a remarkably paternal – and therefore popular – ruler. And he was probably the same king who ruled in Ur when Abram was born and grew to adulthood in the same city. Abram lived in a thriving metropolis, a city that was the mistress of the surrounding world, and under one of the most enlightened despotic regimes historians have uncovered from that world.


Woolley (1880-1960)

The leader of this civilization was Ur-Nammu, the found of the Ur III Dynasty that ran from 2047 B.C. until it was overthrown by the famous Hammurabi in 1750 B.C. It was Ur-Nammu who overthrew the Gutians, a mysterious tribe that had previously conquered Akkad and Sumer, and apparently ruled the greater part of the Mesopotamian area. From what we can tell of contemporary records, the Gutians were both irreligious and incompetent: they neglected both their own gods and the gods of the people they conquered, and they neglected the responsibilities of civil administration throughout their realm. One inscription states that "the grass grew high on the highways of the

land," and another says of the Gutians that they were "an unhappy people unaware how to revere the gods, ignorant of the right religious practices."[13] The overthrow of the Gutians by Ur-Nammu, believed by many archaeologists to have been Semitic, was largely an effort to return the land to its 'pure' religion – which was paganism.

Ur-Nammu thus inaugurated the Sumerian Renaissance, and was himself a pagan Josiah, though the comparison is admittedly anachronistic. Not only did he begin construction on the great ziggurat at Ur, which was dedicated to the Moon-god, he also restored the temples and ziggurats of the surrounding territory. He also restored efficient civil administration and attended to the infrastructure and economic needs of his people. He fostered and encouraged the arts, while at the same time building up the military capabilities of his regime. "[Ur's] founder Ur-Nammu was remarkable for his encouragement of literacy during this period, and in particular for his law code, which is one of the oldest known from Mesopotamia."[14] His reign, and that of his immediate successors, was one in which Ur became the envy of all who saw her, filled with massive palaces that were individually as large or larger than most of the walled towns of the Ancient Near East. In short, Abram came into the world as a citizen "*of no mean city*" and was probably far more cosmopolitan than the biblical narrative leads us to believe.

Ever since the discoveries begun by Leonard Woolley, Ur-Nammu and his city have continued to impress archaeologists and historians.

> His popularity among his subjects is apparent in stele and inscriptions. The historian Gwendolyn Leick writes that Ur-Nammu "did much to enhance the economic and military security of the country. For such efforts he was lauded in a Sumerian hymn that also extols his dedication to the god Enlil of Nippur. Ur Nammu was also the subject of other literary works, such as a text in which he visits the Netherworld". The text Leick cites regarding the Netherworld would

[13] Ancient History Encyclopedia; http://www.ancient.eu/Ur-Nammu/
[14] Harrison, R. K. *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans; 1985); 159.

> make him a mythical hero for generations after his reign. He began construction of the Great Ziggurat of Ur and re-built the ziggurats and temples at Uruk, Eridu, Nippur, and Lagash while also surrounding Ur with magnificent walls said to be "high as a shining mountain" and ordering the construction of canals and irrigation ditches throughout the region. He concentrated regularly on improving the lives of the people, the cities they lived in, and the land the cities rose from. His code of laws illustrates the concern he had for his subjects and the administration of justice and, even though he was clearly very popular, he never moved to have himself deified nor claimed for himself any special titles.[15]

If the archaeologist's reconstruction of Ur and its civilization is correct – and the amount of written and material evidence is convincing – then the departure of Terah and his family from Ur was not because of economic necessity. The so-called Urban Migration would come later, when the civilization surrounding Ur was defeated by the nascent Babylonians under Hammurabi, but that was several centuries after Terah and his son. If God informed Terah of the need to leave Ur (and all we know from Scripture is that Terah left, but not that God told him to do so), the surface reason was not for survival, but rather to separate himself and his family from what was a glorious citadel of paganism – the Sumerian Renaissance of the Ur II Dynasty. But we sense from the biblical text that Terah just did not go far enough.

Ur III Dyansty

Ancient empires did not attain the geographical extent or military power of later empires. The Ur III Dynasty – as well Israel's Davidic Dynasty long afterward – never approached the dominion and power of the Assyrian, neo-Babylonian, or Roman empires. The realms of the ancient Near Eastern kings were usually little more than tribal fiefdoms, and a king powerful enough to

[15] *Idem.*

influence a dozen or so of these petty kingdoms was considered an 'emperor' in his time. But the geographical extent of the Ur III Dynasty was not all that great, as the map above indicates. The map also contains another interesting locale – Mari – that led biblical archaeologists to discover the second great city of the early patriarchal narratives: Haran.

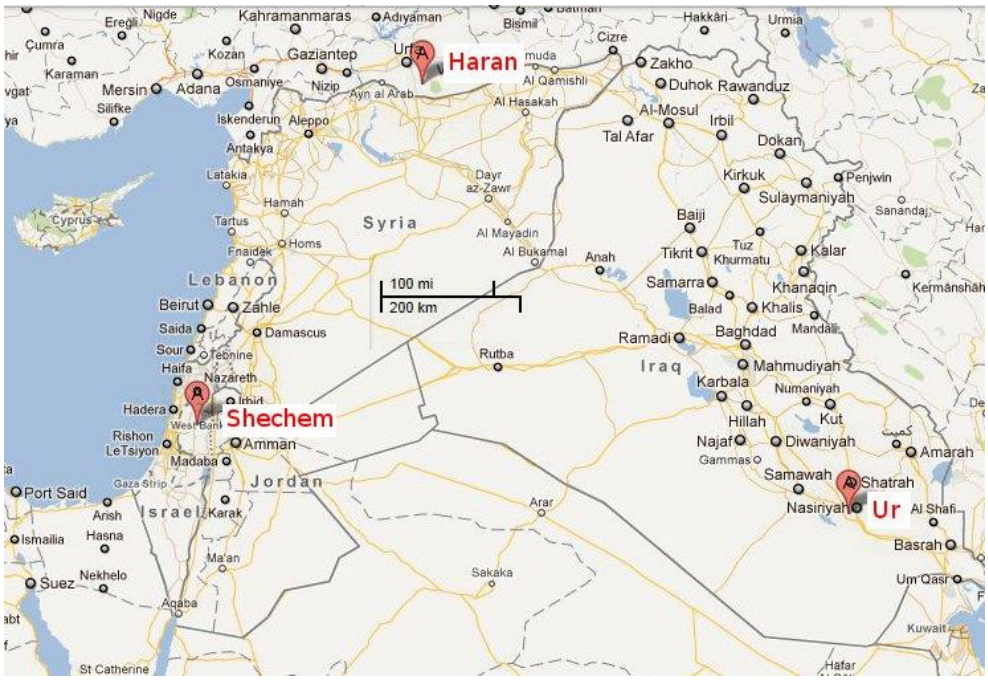
> *And Terah took Abram his son…and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans in order to enter the land of Canaan; and they went as far as Haran, and settled there.*
>
> (Genesis 11:31)

Another city lost to history until the advent of Archaeology in the 19th Century, Haran was approximately half way between Ur and Canaan. It is important to note that Terah did not stop in Haran just to die (though his death is announced in the next verse); rather, *he settled there*. We have no way of knowing just how old Terah was when he departed from Ur, so we have no way of knowing how old he was when he settled in Haran. In support of a longish stay, we have the biblical record that the family of Nahor, Terah's other surviving son and the brother of Abram, ended up in Haran. This fact becomes evident with the narrative of Jacob's travels in search of a wife from the relatives of his mother, Rebekah.

> *Then Isaac sent Jacob away, and he went to Padan-aram, to Laban, son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, the mother of Jacob and Esau…Then Jacob departed from Beersheba and went toward Haran…And Jacob said to them, 'My brothers, where are you from?' And they said, 'We are from Haran.' And he said to them, 'Do you know Laban, the son of Nahor?' And they said, 'We know him.'*
>
> (Genesis 28:5-29:5)

Archaeologists have discovered what is almost universally believed to be the ancient Haran, a city of some importance due to its location at the confluence of trade routes between Damascus, Ninevah, and Carchemish. Haran was not a capitol itself, but rather a leading commercial center of the Kingdom of Mari, which was itself an offshoot of the Ur III Dynasty as that dominion began to

wane. Mari, located between Ur and Haran, was an extravagant city in its own right, and the royal palace, uncovered by archaeologists in the 1930s, occupied over ten acres under one roof. The discovery of Mari was of even greater significance than that of Ur due to the tremendous amount of written records uncovered there, records that helped archaeologists locate, or at least confirm the ancient existence of, many other lost cities such as Haran. "The documents from the kingdom of Mari produce startling proof again that the stories of the patriarchs in the Bible are not pious legends, as is often too readily assumed, but events that are described as happening in a historical period that can be precisely dated."[16]

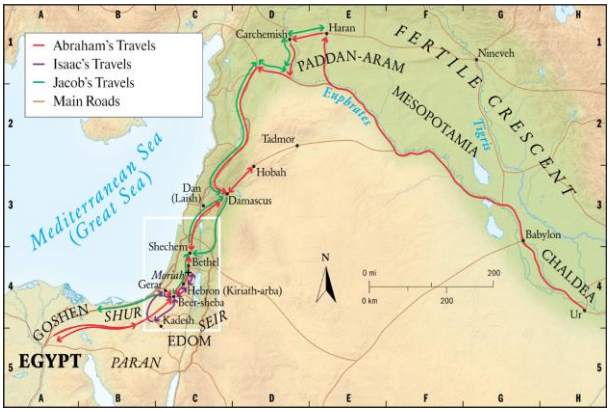


Why *did* Terah settle in Haran? His intentions were to go into the land of Canaan, and we know that this was the purpose of God in His subsequent call of Abram. Any answer is conjecture, but we do know of an aspect of Haran that was similar to Ur, Terah's home city. Both cities were dominated by temples dedicated to Sin, the Moon-god. "[Haran] was the seat of the worship of Sin, the

[16] Keller; 52.

moon-god, from very ancient times."[17] From the knowledge we have of Terah's religious leanings (*cp.* again Joshua 24), and the fact that the ziggurat of Ur was also dedicated to the moon-god Sin, we may surmise that Terah's departure from paganism was stillborn; he continued to worship false gods *"beyond the River."*

One may wonder, looking at the map on the previous page, why Terah's entourage traveled so far north when their intended destination lay almost due west of their hometown, Ur. The answer becomes apparent when one looks at the pattern developed by the inhabited cities and towns of the Ancient Near East,



and the near-complete absence of any substantial village in the land between Ur and Shechem. This pattern is knows as the Fertile Crescent, and it is the geographical feature of the Middle East naturally developed by the flow of the great rivers, and the vast Arabian Desert that lay to the south. The patriarchs would continue to follow the well-worn highways of the Fertile Crescent, as it was essentially forfeiting one's life to venture off the beaten path in favor of a 'short cut' through the desert.

And the Canaanite was then in the Land:

This statement in Genesis 12:6 has led many scholars to conclude, or to solidify their previous conclusion, that the patriarchal narrative was written long after Moses. This conclusion comes from the fact that the Canaanite was still in the land in the days of Moses; indeed, it was to fall to Joshua to *displace* the Canaanite from the land in favor of the children of Israel, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is a difficult passage, though not so difficult as to

[17] Orr, James, ed. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans; 1956); 1337.

throw the dating of the entire Pentateuch into later ages. It may be that the phrase is simply one of stark contrast to what we read in the verse immediately following, *"The LORD appeared to Abram and said, 'To your descendants I will give this land.'"*[18]

In any event, the subject of this study is the geography and demography of the patriarch's world. Abram's journey into the land of Canaan leads us to the investigation of both the land and the people of Canaan, and to the discovery that, at least in regards to the people of the land, history is not all that clear. The land, of course, comprises that narrow bottleneck of habitable land wedged between the Arabian Desert and the Mediterranean Sea. "Canaan is the link between Egypt and Asia. The most important trade route of the ancient world passes through this country. Merchants and caravans, migratory tribes and peoples, followed this road, which the armies of the great conquerors were later to make use of. Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans, one after another, made the land and its people the plaything of their economic, strategic, and political concerns."[19] To this center-of-all-that-is-happening, God brought Abram and promised possession of this crossroads of ancient kingdoms to his descendants. There is perhaps no stronger biblical witness against the doctrine of monasticism than the geography of Canaan.

But who were the 'Canaanites'? The biblical answer would seem to be that they were the descendants of Canaan, the son of Ham, the son of Noah. But even a cursory study of the Old Testament writings will prove that names are fluid things – Abram's brother's name was Haran, as was the town to which

[18] Gen. 12:7
[19] Keller; 57.

Terah and Abram first migrated – though it seems obvious that the town was not named for the brother. With regard to Canaan, the vast weight of archaeological evidence is that the majority of the inhabitants of the land were not Hamitic, but rather *Semitic*. As with Ur, and Haran, we have learned that the territory to which Abram journeyed was primarily Semitic in demographic character. In other words, the patriarchal narratives tell the story of one family's blessings and judgments, which is what we would have expected had we considered the biblical text from the covenantal perspective. But more on that later.

There is considerable debate as to exactly who the Canaanites were; in fact, there is little or no agreement that the term 'Canaanite' is really an accurate description of a tribal people. In ancient inscriptions the term is most consistently used for the territory west of the Jordan River, known later as Palestine,[20] while the people who inhabited that land were as often called Amorites or Phoenicians as they were Canaanites. There is a similarity between the possible etymology of Phoenician and Canaanite, in that both may derive from the term for 'purple' in the Greek and the Sumerian languages respectively. The people who inhabited the land were renown for the production of purple dye from the shellfish Murex, and the commercial exploitation of this trade undergirded the economic strength of such ancient cities as Sidon, Tyre, and Byblos – all Phoenician cities of 'Canaan.' It is unlikely that the inland tribes of Canaan – those with whom Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would have come into contact – benefited much from this lucrative trade, but it appears that the whole territory was loosely related ethnically, and that the people were by and large Semitic.

As mentioned above, this discovery should not surprise the student of Old Testament Scripture. That the land should be called Canaan, the same name as the grandson of Noah through Ham, would naturally lead to the conclusion that

[20] The name 'Palestine' is one that would have irked the Israelite, as it derives from the term commonly used for Philistines, the perennials enemies of Israel.

the inhabitants of the land were Hamitic. In this light, the Israelite conquest of the Promised Land is seen as the fulfillment of the curse upon Canaan pronounced by Noah (*cp.* Genesis 9:25). When one considers, however, the Noaic blessing upon Shem, and understands the covenantal framework of the biblical narrative, then it stands to reason that the heart of the subsequent history would deal with that lineage. The archaeological data now available indicates with a remarkable degree of consistency, that by the time of the patriarchs whatever Hamitic population had inhabited the land called Canaan had been displaced by migratory waves of Semitic peoples. The land retained the name, but the people no longer possessed the ethnicity that went with that name.

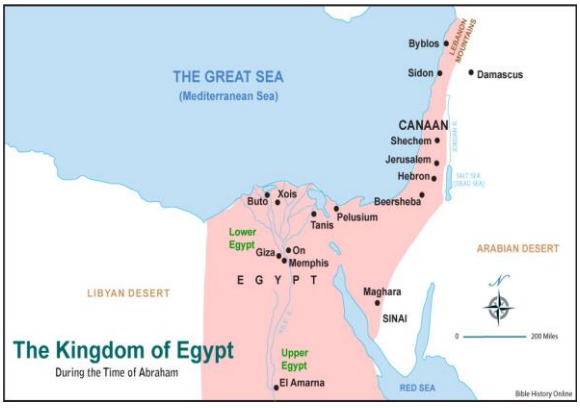
Thus the patriarchal narratives once again parallel the ante-diluvian narratives. In the earlier era, the chosen lineage was that of Seth, the other descendants of Adam being passed over in relative obscurity (with the notable exception of Lamech, in the same generation as the righteous Enoch). Yet even in the lineage of Seth there was sad apostasy from the true faith, so that by the time of the Flood there was only one man found to still be 'walking with God,' Noah. In like literary manner, the patriarchal narratives deal largely with the apostasy of the lineage of Shem – with the 'renaissance' of Ur being led by Semites, the prosperous city of Haran, dedicated to the Moon-god, inhabited by Semites, and the various tribes of Canaan all also Semites. Indeed, at the end of this thread of the redemptive narrative, there is not even one man left who is walking with God – at least not to our knowledge – and the family that will begin the next stage were "*worshipping false gods beyond the River.*" This is covenantal history, as well as 'remnant' history – which will be the consistent plot through the subsequent story of the nation of Israel. Of the peoples outside the lineage of Shem, we read much later, "*And in the generations gone by, He permitted all the nations to go their own ways.*"[21] There is, however, at least one of these 'nations'

[21] Acts 14:16

that factors impressively into both the patriarchal narratives and the subsequent history of Israel, God's covenant people: the nation of Egypt.

The Land of the Pharaohs:

Shortly after arriving in Canaan, or so it seems from the narrative, Abram is forced (again, so it seems) to take his household down to Egypt in order to find food during a severe famine in the land. *"Now there was a famine in the land; so Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there; for the famine was severe in the land."*[22] Without having made a exhaustive study of the biblical text, we can certainly issue a confident assertion that not one of God's chosen people is ever *told by God* to go down to Egypt. Abraham is, of course, told that his descendents will dwell in Egypt for four hundred years, and will be enslaved and oppressed there. But the general tenor of the divine revelation is that Egypt is a place God's people do not go to, in any event. This is manifestly evident during the wilderness wanderings of Israel under Moses' leadership, and much later during the days of Jeremiah, when the people who remained after the first Babylonian deportation clamored to 'go down to Egypt.' From the overall attitude we find in Scripture concerning Egypt, we cannot conclude that Abram's decision to go there during the famine was one that God endorsed, much less actually commanded.

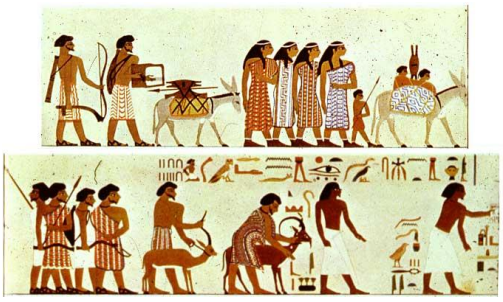


By the time Abram journeyed to Canaan from Mesopotamia, the Kingdom of Egypt had already been well established for hundreds of years. The Great Pyramids of Giza has been constructed half a millennium before Abram's birth, and approximately ten "Dynasties" had come and gone as successive ruling families saw their power either expand or contract along the Nile and north along the coastline of the

[22] Genesis 12:10

Great Sea. Egypt is one of the oldest established powers of the ancient world, and much has been discovered by archaeologists from the regions of this arid land.

Biblically Egypt is the same as Mizraim, who was one of the sons of Ham and a brother to Canaan. So the peoples of Egypt were Hamitic by ethnicity, and this remained true of most of the ancient dynasties with one notable exception, which we will discuss at length below. The manner in which Egypt often comes into view in the patriarchal narratives is in regard to food, and this aspect of the historical record has been powerfully confirmed by both archaeological and historical data. Egypt was the breadbasket of the ancient world due to the regular cycles of the flooding of the Nile and the elaborate irrigation canals built by the early dynasts in order to make efficient use of the water. This fact resulted in a regular migration of foreigners into Egypt in search of food, as the rest of the Ancient Near East was subject to long dry periods leading to drought and famine. The Hieroglyphs of Beni-Hasan on the Nile River, depict an entourage of people who are dressed and groomed in a distinctive manner from that of the Egyptians. This caravan is being led by a man named Abishai – a well-known Semitic name, and certainly not an Egyptian one. Abishai is making obeisance to an Egyptian, while another Egyptian appears to be recording the names of the migrants. Whereas the Egyptians are bare-chested, dressed in the usual loin wrap, the visiting entourage depicts full length robes of multi-colored hues (remember the famous coat given by Jacob to his favorite son, Joseph?).



Hieroglyph of Beni-Hasan, Egypt

Egypt was remarkably welcoming of these strangers, as they often brought with them skills that the Egyptians needed, as well as hard currency with which to purchase the food they sought (*cp*. Gen. 42:5). The patterns of migration had occurred over so many centuries, that by the time of Abram (*c.*

1900 B.C.,[23] which, incidentally, also happens to be the approximate date of the Beni-Hasan hieroglyphs), the Egyptians had established a thorough customs system to record and keep track of all incoming caravans. "Certainly there were no passports, but formalities and officialdom made life difficult for foreign visitors even then. Anyone entering Egypt had to state the number in his party, the reason for his journey, and the probable length of his stay."[24] This procedure is illustrated in the Bible by the interrogation that Joseph subjected his brothers to upon their arrival in Egypt.

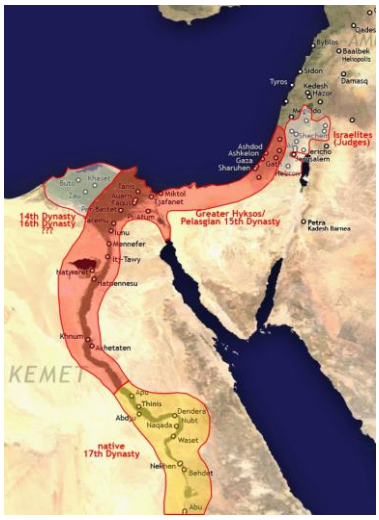
Another custom in the Ancient Near East that has been confirmed by extra-biblical records, is the taking of women from the migrant caravan, for use in the harem of the leading official or of the Pharaoh himself. The traditions of the region placed a great deal of authority upon the brother of a woman, often more so than even her husband. Thus the brother, in the absence of a father, would be the one to whom suit was made for a woman's hand, and to whom great riches might accrue if his sister was especially desirable. Husbands, the archaeological record shows, were expendable; brothers were to be respected and rewarded for the hand of their sister. Both the assassination of husbands, and the financial aggrandizement of brothers, is well attested in the Egyptian ancient records. Thus, as offensive as the narrative is to our 21st Century sensibilities, the passing off of Sarai as Abram's sister was not an uncommon occurrence, and it was one likely to succeed in the preservation of Abram's life.

The Second Intermediate Dynasty – the Hyksos Pharaohs:

A remarkable period has been documented in the history of the Egyptian dynasties – the Second Intermediate Period. The Pharaohs of this dynasty were, remarkably, *not* Egyptian; they were *Semites*, known as the Hyksos. These rulers were derisively called the 'Shepherd Kings' by the Egyptians themselves, and

[23] *Cp*. Anati; 382.
[24] Keller; 71.

their memory was odious to the native people when, after about two hundred years of rule, they were finally ousted from the land. But during a time of weak leadership among the Egyptians ruling families – perhaps the typical spate of civil wars common to all civilizations – Semitic nomads invaded from the northeast and established dominion over the majority of Lower Egypt. This event did not take place during the time of Abraham, but a couple of centuries later, in the eighteenth before Christ. [25] What is significant about this political era is that it corresponds exactly with the migration of Jacob and his family during the chancellorship of Joseph in Egypt. Indeed, it alone makes sense of several statements and situations recorded in the patriarchal narratives.



For one, it explains how Joseph would find such favor and rise to such a level of power as a Semite in an Egyptian government. Corresponding to this, it sheds light on Joseph's counsel to his father, to tell Pharaoh that Jacob and his people were shepherds, *"for the Egyptians despised shepherding."* The *Egyptians* despised shepherds, but the *Hyksos rulers* did not. Thus Joseph was preparing the way for his father and brothers to be settled in a well-pastured part of the land, Goshen, which was also removed from the native population due to the shepherding occupation predominant in that region of Egypt.

> Because the Hyksos kings were Semites like the sons of Jacob, and in view of the Bible evidence that this family was made welcome in Egypt, we conclude that it was during the time of Hyksos rule that the small family, which was later to become Israel, came to Egypt.[26]

Finally, the departure of the Hyksos from Egypt and the return of native Egyptian rule once again (not to be interrupted until the arrival of the Greeks

[25] Bright, John *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press; 1981); 59.
[26] Thompson; 43.

under Alexander the Great), elucidates the text in Exodus, where we are told *"Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph."*[27] This 'new king' probably knew of Joseph, but the native hatred of the previous foreign rule by the Semitic Hyksos, and their deep disdain for both the Semitic people and their preferred occupation, caused the native Egyptian dynasties that followed the Hyksos to essentially erase the memory of this chapter of their history. They still, of course, had to deal with the greatly enlarge population of Hebrews that had entered the land under the Hyksos rulers, and had reproduced at a rate far greater than the native population; but that is a story of another book and another study.

Divine sovereignty and providence is clearly seen in the migratory patterns of the peoples in the Ancient Near East, as is the biblical literary pattern of tracing redemptive history primarily through the history of a chosen lineage – even presenting the apostasy of that chosen lineage – with only incidental intrusions of the *goyim*, the 'nations.' The Bible was not meant to be a comprehensive history text, nor is it an archaeological factbook or a treatise on geography. But the sciences of History, Archaeology, and Geology have consistently shown the biblical text to be accurate to the era, even though the text itself may have been written long after the era under consideration. The demography and geography of the patriarchal narratives has proven true to all that has been discovered of the time between the 20th and the 18th centuries before Christ, and we anticipate further archaeological discoveries will only further validate the historicity and accuracy of the Bible.

[27] Exodus 1:8

Week 3: **The Call of Abram – Take One**

Text Reading: **Genesis 12:1 - 3**

"By the time the careful reader has finished the first eleven chapters of Genesis,
he is well-nigh convinced that mankind
left to its own devices,
is doomed to failure, destruction, and misery."
(Leon Kass)

The patriarchal narrative respecting Abraham is traditionally broken into four phases, corresponding to the four announcements of blessing by Jehovah in the course of Abraham's life – at least the four that are recorded in the Genesis narratives. Genesis 12:1-3 is, of course, the first of these. The others occur in Genesis 15, 17, and 22 and are linked by the consistent promise of *blessing* upon the patriarch.

Gen. 12:1-3	**Gen. 15:1**	**Gen. 17:1-2**	**Gen. 22:17-18**
"…and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you…"	*"Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great."*	*"And I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will multiply you exceedingly."*	*"…indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens…"*

The fourfold division of Abraham's life story is very basic, and can be quite misleading as there are other times that God spoke to Abraham, and other significant events in the patriarch's recorded history that might get glossed over by a too-slavish reliance upon a fabricated framework. Nonetheless, these four key passages do highlight two important threads that are woven through the entire fabric of the Abrahamic narrative: the *sovereign election* of Abram by God, and the *intense bless-ing* intended by that election not only to Abraham but to *all the nations of the earth*. Geerhardus Vos properly recognizes that this section of Scripture begins a *divine particularism* – the singling out of Abram and his family from all others – with *a*

Vos (1862-1949)

universal intention – the blessing of all the nations in and through Abraham. Vos writes, "The election of Abraham, and in the further development of things, of Israel, was meant as a particularistic means towards a universalistic end."[28]

In our journey through the Abrahamic narratives, we will not attempt to force the various events and storylines into the traditional fourfold division. Nevertheless, here at the beginning, it will be of hopeful benefit to take an overview of the patriarch's covenant life with Jehovah, and use these four divine pronouncements as, so to speak, points of the compass.

Genesis 12 – *Leave your land and family…and I will give you another*

Not to get into too much detail in these introductory remarks – especially since the call of Abram in Chapter 12 is the theme of this particular lesson – it is of note that these opening verses contain both *commands* and *promises*. Jehovah will replace what Abram gives up – land and family – and will receive immensely more than he sacrifices. He will be *blessed* and will himself *be a blessing* to all the peoples of the earth. But Abram is without children at this time, and his wife Sarai is barren.

Genesis 15 – *You have power and renown…but you will have a son*

The previous chapter proclaims Abram's military power and the respect that he attained among the peoples of the land in which he sojourned. But what was it all for, seeing that he had no heir, *"and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus."* This is the chapter of the dark vision, the *cutting of the covenant* in which God alone passes through the divided sacrifice, thus offering Himself as sole surety against the promises that He has given Abram. The covenant initiated in Genesis 12 must be seen as *monergistic* – entirely effectuated by God –

[28] Vos, Geerhardus *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: W^{m} B. Eerdmans; 1991); 77. It is important to note here that Vos does not use the term 'universalistic' in the sense of universal salvation to each and every human being, but rather in the nationalistic sense of salvation wrought in *every tongue*, *tribe*, *and nation.*

and not *synergistic* – a cooperative effort between God and Abram. This phase of the covenant's unfolding sets the stage for just such synergism, with the illegitimate birth of Ishmael from Abram's union with Hagar, Sarai's maidservant.

Chapter 17 – *No longer will your name be Abram, but…Abraham*

In the midst of Abram's failed attempt to preempt God and to bring about the blessing by his own strength, God speaks again the promise that not only will he have a son *"who shall come forth from your own body"* (15:4), but that Abram will become *"the father of a multitude of nations."* It is of great significance, of course, that it is here that God changes both Abram's and Sarai's names, to Abraham and Sarah. It is also significant that Abraham persists in a *synergistic* vein, *"Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!"* he cries. (17:18). And Jehovah simply answers, 'No.'

Genesis 22 – *Take your son, your only son, the son whom you love…*

This event is widely, and properly, recognized as the climax of the Abrahamic narratives, and the culmination of the patriarch's journey of faith from Ur to Haran to Moriah. This is, as well, the epitome of the Messianic hope within the Abrahamic Covenant, *"In the mount of the LORD it will be provided."* (22:14).

There is a recognizable progression in the development of the covenant relationship between Jehovah and Abram/Abraham, and these four particular theophanies are thus helpful in providing the broadest of frameworks in which to see that progression. However, as with the four points of the compass, these events are suggestive of the direction of the narrative, but there are many points in between. Indeed, and again like the four points of the compass, the life of Abram/Abraham seems to veer off in conflicting paths, both literally as to his journeys, and spiritually as to his comprehension and grasp of the call of Jehovah

upon him. From these four points we may say of the Abrahamic narratives that, whereas the patriarch's faith began *as small as a grain of mustard seed*, it eventually *grew into a mighty tree.* But the journey was anything but simple and straightforward.

Come Out From Among Them…

> ***Now the LORD said to Abram,***
> ***Go forth from your country,***
> ***And from your relatives***
> ***And from your father's house,***
> ***To the land which I will show you;*** **(12:1)**

Chronology in Scripture is one of the most difficult tasks in the hermeneutical work. The reader of verse 1 of Chapter 12 was just notified of the passing of Terah, Abram's father, in the closing verse of Chapter 11 – and, of course, we remember that the chapter and verse divisions were added later. At first glance, therefore, it seems that Terah and Abram and company settled in Haran for quite some time, and that Abram's continuation of the journey to Canaan did not commence until after his father's death. But Scripture does not work along such linear chronology as that, and the statement of Terah's death may have nothing chronologically to do with the subsequent call of Abram.

Indeed, if we look at the ages of Terah at his passing, and of Abram at his arrival into Canaan, it would seem that the father was very much alive when the son departed from Haran. Terah, we are told in 11:26, lived seventy years "*and became the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran.*" The listing of three sons does not necessitate their birth order, as it did not in the case of Noah's sons. Nor does it require us to view the three brothers as triplets – a very unlikely situation. The most reasonable reading of such a statement is that *by the time he was seventy* Terah had become the father of these three sons (and, we may assume, other sons and daughters as well). Now in 11:32 we read that Terah was 205 years old when he died in Haran. On the other hand, Abram was himself seventy-five

years old when he departed from Haran (12:4), which event would have occurred somewhere around Terah's 145th year (if Abram was the youngest of the three named sons). If, as many believe, Abram did not leave Haran until his father Terah had died, then Terah would have been 130 years old when Abram was born. This would be quite a stretch to our understanding of 11:26, "*And Terah lived seventy years, and became the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran.*"

It is best to understand 11:32 as the typical closing passage of a genealogical list, "*and so-and-so lived a certain number of years, and had sons and daughters, and so-and-so died…*" rather than to force it into a chronological marker with respect to 12:1. The opening verse of Chapter 12, then, forms the true beginning of the Abrahamic narrative with the first explicit call upon Abram by Jehovah, "*Go forth from your country…*" This call also begins the pattern of God's redemptive relationship with His people from Abram on through the Church: "*Come out from among them and be separate, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people.*" Election to separation is the consistent characteristic of the 'called ones' of God throughout history, both biblical and afterward.

Liberal scholars cannot see the connection between the call of Abram and what has transpired before under Noah and those who lived before the Flood. E. A. Speiser, for instance, writes "There was nothing in the preceding accounts to prepare us for Abraham's mission."[29] Speiser recognizes that what God is doing in Abram is different than what He did before Abram, but fails to see the continuity even in the midst of this discontinuity. The literary form of the genealogical narratives establishes a powerful connection of pattern between Noah and Terah – with the ten generations and then three sons repeated in both lines. Furthermore, Speiser forgets the word of the Lord to Noah, recorded in Chapter 7, "*Then the LORD said to Noah, 'Enter the ark, you and all your household…*" (7:1). This is a parallel command to 12:1, with the difference being that instead of destroying the rest of mankind beyond Noah and his family, the LORD will now

[29] Speiser, E. A. *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday; 1964); 87.

suffer the nations to go their own way, and will concentrate His outward displays of grace on the family and lineage of Abram.

> With the choice of Abram the revelation of God to man assumed a select character, inasmuch as God manifested Himself henceforth to Abram and his posterity alone as the author of salvation and the guide to true life; whilst other nations were left to follow their own course according to the powers conferred upon them, in order that they might learn that in their way, and without fellowship with the living God, it was impossible to find peace to the soul, and the true blessedness of life.[30]

Also tying together the Genesis narratives is the fact that Abram is the 'end' of the lineage of Shem, just as Noah was the 'end' of the lineage of Seth. Therefore, while we might not have predicted the call of one individual – and certainly could not have predicted that it would be Abram – there is no cause for surprise when we encounter it, and after we read of Abram's call, there is ample evidence to show the consistency of God's dealings even with the discontinuity of His methods. The thread woven through it all is the 'Seed of Woman' promised so many generations before, and still the operative redemptive principle and hope for mankind's salvation.

The intensity of the call of God is shown in the threefold formula of 12:1, wherein Abram is called *"from his country,"* then *"from his clan,"* and finally *"from his family."* Abram's break with his past was to be 'root and branch,' or so it would seem from this initial call by God. Later we will see that the family of Terah remained important and connected to that of Abraham, as both his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob would take wives from the daughters of the family of Nahor, Abram's brother. Still, the terminology of 12:1 is sacrificial; if Abram is to be blessed, he must leave essentially everything behind in Haran. "The most general tie, that with the 'land,' is named first, then follow, narrowing step by step, the bond of the clan, i.e., the more distant relatives, and the immediate

[30] Delitzsch, F. and C. F. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Volume I* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1980); 181.

family."[31] Thus the call of Abram prefigures the word of our Lord, *"He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me"*[32]

But we must be careful here not to fall into the trap that has bedeviled Jewish and Christian scholars alike. There was no merit to be found in Abram before the call of God, nor any merit accrued by his obedience. The event recorded here in Genesis 12 is *gracious* through and through. Even von Rad, a liberal with regard to the historicity of the text but relatively a conservative with regard to the theology therein, recognizes the monergistic grace of God in the call of Abram.

> And now follows the new point of departure in the divine revelation of salvation: an address to a man amidst the multitude of existing nations, a constraining of this one man for God and his plan of history by virtue of a free act of choice…Yahweh is the subject of the first verb at the beginning of the first statement and thus the subject of the entire subsequent sacred history.[33]

Andrew Fuller adds, "There appears no reason to conclude that he was better than his neighbors. He did not choose the Lord, but the Lord chose him, and brought him out from amongst the idolaters."[34] Abram, we shall see, did indeed respond with the 'obedience of faith,' and in doing so became the father of the faithful to all who believe. But we are prevented by the words of Joshua 27, and even by the subsequent life of Abram, from concluding that his call was the result of something meritorious that Jehovah found within him. Rather, it was with Abram as it is with all believers, their faith *"was not of works; it is the gift of God."*

This is not to diminish the responsibility of Abram to obey the voice of Jehovah, nor the responsibility of every man to repent and believe when once he

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[31] Von Rad, Gerhard *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press; 1972); 159.
[32] Matthew 10:37
[33] Von Rad; 159.
[34] Fuller, Andrew *Works of Andrew Fuller: Volume III* (Philadelphia: The American Baptist Publishing Society; 1845); 51.

hears the gospel. The apostle reminds us that it *was* the gospel that Abraham heard when God called him.

> *Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU." So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.*[35]

Blessed…and a Blessing:

> ***And I will make you a great nation,***
> ***And I will bless you,***
> ***And make your name great;***
> ***And so you shall be a blessing;***
> ***And I will bless those who bless you,***
> ***And the one who curses you I will curse.***
> ***And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.*** **(12:2-3)**

The parallel between Abram and Noah somewhat breaks down with this verse. Indeed, both men were called out from the midst of their respective generations, and both became the progenitors of a 'new' race – Noah of the human race; Abram of the people of God. "Abraham, like Noah, marks a new beginning as well as a return to God's original plan of blessing 'all humankind.'"[36] Nonetheless, the context of their calling is drastically different. With Noah, of course, the call to enter the ark was the precursor to the destruction of the world and of the human race beyond Noah's small family. Abram's case is quite different in that the context is that of *blessing* not only to Abram himself, but through him and in him, to the rest of the world.

The first clause of this 'promise' addresses the very thing that Abram was called to leave in verse 1. Abram was called to leave his country, God would make of him a great nation; he was called to leave his clan and family – his 'name' in the ancient world - God promises to make his name great. The

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[35] Galatians 3:7-9

[36] Sailhamer, John H. *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House; 1992); 139.

promise of a great name is reminiscent of the 'name' that mankind sought for itself at Babel; God now promising by grace what Man attempted to achieve by hubris. The promise of a name and a great nation evidently appealed to Abram, as we will see later that he did not forget these elements of his call. Perhaps as a citizen of Ur, Abram already possessed some degree of notoriety – we will soon find out that he traveled with a fairly large entourage of servants and slaves – and the loss of this was weighing heavily on the mind of his flesh. We have yet to conclude regeneration on the part of Abram; thus far we have no reason to see him as other than the idolater of whom Joshua speaks *beyond the River.*

What must Abram have thought when he heard the voice of Jehovah? If the chronologies of the post-Flood patriarchs is linear, then a case can be made that Noah was still alive when Abram was born. Be that as it may, we need not conclude that all knowledge of Jehovah – El Elyon and El Shaddai – had completely disappeared from among the descendents of Noah. Positive indication that it had not may be found in both Job and Melchizedek. As born in the lineage of Shem, Abram would undoubtedly had additional teachings and traditions of the true God, though it is equally evident that the poison of idolatry had entered the veins of that chosen line. The situation would repeat itself in the descendants of Abraham when they were in Egypt (remember, Moses asked God exactly who he should say had sent him to the Israelites), and even again while they lived in the Promised Land. So the presence of idolatry does not necessitate the complete ignorance of Jehovah.

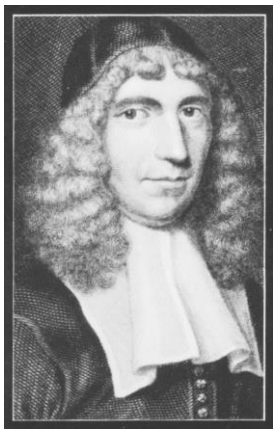
Leon Kass (b. 1939)

Whatever Abram must have thought regarding the voice of God calling him to leave everything and to go out from his kith and kin, "*not knowing where he was going,*" he was sufficiently moved by the voice and by that which was promised, that he obeyed without any apparent hesitation. Leon Kass, somewhat of a skeptical believer, it would seem,

considers ambition to have been a significant element in the psychological makeup of the patriarch, motivating him to take heed to the voice that he heard.

> I therefore incline to the view that Abram goes not (as the strictly pious interpretation would have it) because he is already a God-fearing and obedient man of faith who knows that the voice is the voice of God Almighty. He goes because, in his heart, he is an ambitious man with a desire for greatness who wants the promise, and he goes because, in his mind, he has some reason to believe that the voice that called him just might belong to a power great enough to deliver.[37]

To be sure, this is a somewhat cynical (and certainly not traditional) view. However, it is not therefore to be dismissed. Abram had a great deal to learn about God, and it would be quite some time before God would change the patriarch's name from Abram to Abraham, always a significant event in the life of a man (note also Jacob's name change to Israel). When contrasted with John Owen's view of the call of Abram, one may see Kass' theory as perhaps more rational, given where Abram was at the time of his call. Owen writes,



John Owen (1616-83)

> Clearly, the call of Abraham arose from the powerful and heart-rending operations of the Holy Spirit and was accompanied by an oracle or external word…This call included both the renewal of the whole man by regeneration of heart and life to godliness, and an external separation by solemn vow to worship and serve the true God alone.[38]

It is a bit premature to see the regeneration of Abram in Genesis 12, and rather more in keeping with the overall flow of the narrative to see in him a man not entirely devoid of the knowledge of Jehovah, and as one who perhaps had remembered the stories of Jehovah's great power. It is hardly unusual for the

[37] Kass, Leon R. *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York: Free Press; 2003); 257.
[38] Owen, John *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Soli Deo Gloria Publications; 2009); 365.

great men among the ancients to lay claim to hearing and heeding the voice of a god – Constantine claimed a revelation from the God of the Christians before his famous battle against Maxentius at Milvan Bridge. Abram was to discover that the voice that called him was that of the true and holy God, but the discovery of this fact, and Abram's receiving of it to himself, is part of the narrative and not of the introduction.

> Abraham's journey to the Promised Land was thus no routine expedition of several hundred miles. Instead, it was the start of an epic voyage in search of spiritual truths, a quest that was to constitute the central theme of biblical history.[39]

What is intriguing about the content of God's call upon Abram is that his life would become both the receptacle and the source of blessing. This is not a typical characteristic of the great ones of the earth, as Andrew Fuller points out, "The great names among the heathen would very commonly arise from their being curses and plagues to mankind; but [Abram] should have the honour and happiness of being great in goodness, great in communicating light and life to his species."[40] The element of universalism must not be lost from the Abrahamic narratives, as it was sadly lost among his physical descendants, ethnic Israel. There is a direct connection between the call of Abram and the promise of the Seed of Woman who would crush the serpent's head and, in so doing, restore that which was lost by the first Adam. "All further promises, therefore, not only to the patriarchs, but also to Israel, were merely expansions and closer definitions of the salvation held out to the whole human race in the first promise."[41]

The language of the blessing is, as usual, interspersed with that of cursing. However, it is frequently noted among the commentators – as it should be – that

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[39] Speiser; 88
[40] Fuller; 52.
[41] Keil & Delitzsch; 193

the blessings far surpass the cursings within the initial call. "And how significant is it, that they who bless are spoken of in the plural, and they who curse only in the singular!"[42] God is here revealing Himself in an expanded manner, as we shall see throughout the Abrahamic narratives. In Noah He revealed Himself as holy and just; in Abram as gracious and full of mercy. This is not 'new' to God; He was merciful in saving Noah from the Flood and, thereby, saving the entire human race in him. But we may say that the different 'dispensations' of God's self-disclosure reveal to us a fuller picture of the divine nature – never a *full* picture, but fuller and always accurate. Thus we can see a close parallel between these words in Genesis 12:3, where the objects of blessing are numerous in comparison to the object of cursing, and Jehovah's revelation of Himself to Moses in Exodus 34.

> *Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations."*
>
> (Exodus 34:6-7)

[42] Delitzsch; 379.

Week 4: **Abram's First Tour**

Text Reading: **Genesis 12:4 - 20**

"He acts shrewdly,
but through weakness of faith immorally."
(Franz Delitzsch)

The pace of Genesis 12 gives the distinct impression that Abram entered the land of Canaan from the north, and fairly rapidly exited it in the south. This 'first tour' of the Promised Land may indeed have taken a number of years, we have no way of knowing as we are not given any age markers other than Abram's age at his departure from Haran. However, like other events recorded in Genesis (i.e., the Fall of Man), we get the sense that not much time elapsed between the patriarch's initial entry into the land, and his departure from the land on the way to Egypt. Nor are we given much to go on with regard to why Abram moved through the land so quickly, except by extrapolation – that the famine that would impel him to Egypt was already widespread throughout Canaan when he first arrived. "The first journey through Canaan was one of exploration, and it seems to have been rapidly performed."[43]

There is, however, another manner of looking at Abram's initial journey through the land, and one that leads to the conclusion that it may have taken longer than the rapid pace of the narrative would indicate. Three places are mentioned in this 'first tour' of Canaan by Abram: Shechem, Bethel, and the Negev. Shechem is located in the north of the land, between the twin peaks of Mt. Gerazim and Mt. Ebal (which will figure significantly in Abram's descendants' history as they re-enter the land under Joshua. Bethel is in the center of the land, not far from Jerusalem. The Negev is the southern

[43] Jamieson, Robert, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown *A Commentary on the Old and New Testaments; Volume I* (Grand Rapids: W^m B. Eerdmans Publishing Co; 1948); 131.

desert, its most famous villages being Hebron and Beer-sheba. On a very surface level, this initial journey may have been nothing more than a reconnaissance mission, as the patriarch mapped out the length of the land promised to his descendants.

But we have seen that literary patterns are important to the reading of the Old Testament narratives, and this 'first tour' of Abram establishes just such a pattern to be followed by subsequent entrants to the Promised Land. For instance, when Jacob finally returned to Canaan after his sojourn with Laban, bringing his two wives, two concubines, and eleven sons (and a daughter) with him, he camps first at Shechem, where he purchases his first real estate in the land of his grandfather. Remarkably, Jacob did as his ancestor, and built an altar to the LORD in Shechem.

> *Now Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Paddan-aram, and camped before the city. He bought the piece of land where he had pitched his tent from the hand of the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, for one hundred pieces of money. Then he erected there an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel.*
>
> (Genesis 33:18-20)

Soon afterward, Jacob journeys on from Shechem to Bethel, and there sets up an altar to the LORD after having his famous wrestling match.

> *Then God said to Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel and live there, and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau." So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Put away the foreign gods which are among you, and purify yourselves and change your garments; and let us arise and go up to Bethel, and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone." So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods which they had and the rings which were in their ears, and Jacob hid them under the oak which was near Shechem.*
>
> (Genesis 35:1-4)

Jacob, now Israel, journeyed farther south from Bethel and came to his father Isaac in Hebron – the Negev – where apparently Isaac and Abraham had finally settled down from all their wanderings.

> *Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre of Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned. Now the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years. Isaac breathed his last and died and was gathered to his people, an old man of ripe age; and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.*
>
> (Genesis 35:27-28)

The parallelism continues long after the deaths of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Under Joshua, the children of Israel first conquered the city of Ai (not counting the city of Jericho, which was destroyed by direct intervention by God and not through Israelite military power), which is mentioned in Genesis 12 as being to the east of where Abram pitched his tent with Bethel on the west. Joshua then led the people north to Mt. Ebal, hard by Shechem, and he built an altar there to the LORD. From there the conquest of Canaan moved north of Shechem (Josh. 10) and south of Bethel/Ai (Josh. 11), the very same regions scoped out by Abram and Jacob.

The land was promised to Abram, then again to his son Isaac and to his grandson, Jacob. But in each promise the fulfillment was prospective and prophetic – it would be several generations later before the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would conquer and inhabit the land – from north to south – as their own theonomic nation. But the patriarchs mapped out the land, and 'claimed' it in a manner similar to the planting of a nation's flag upon claimed land in the Age of Exploration. The *altar* to Jehovah was the first and most significant 'flag' planted in the land by Abram, later by Jacob, and finally by Joshua. The purchase of land – be it only so much as a cave in which to bury Sarah – was another 'claim' that would establish the roots of the people deep into the soil of Canaan. Finally, the digging of wells, a crucial need in an arid land, signified a permanency unusual for nomadic peoples – once the well was dug, it

became an oasis and an anchor holding the otherwise mobile tribe to one place. Isaac, for instance, settled in the land of the Negev where his father Abraham had dug the wells needed for the sustenance of the flocks and herds (Gen. 26:18*ff*). The first journey of Abram, therefore, was literally staking out the land that would become the possession of his descendants, laying claim to it in the name of Jehovah as an explorer would claim territory in the name of a king. "These parallels show clearly the method of demonstrating that the deeds of the fathers in former times prefigure those of their descendants in the present…This is to show that the conquest of the land had already been accomplished in a symbolic way in the times of the fathers."[44]

So Abram went forth as the LORD had spoken to him; and Lot went with him. Now Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew, and all their possessions which they had accumulated, and the persons which they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan; thus they came to the land of Canaan. **(12:4-5)**

It is not until Genesis 15 that we read that *"Abram believed in the LORD, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness."* (15:6) That later moment may indeed be the point in time at which Abram became what we would now call a 'believer.' Nonetheless, it must be noted that the patriarch did not hesitate to obey the call of Jehovah from Haran, immediately departing from his land, his clan, and his family without any indication of *"wavering in unbelief."* The chronology of the narratives indicate that Terah, Abram's father, was still alive and dwelling in Haran, a fact that would make Abram's departure even more remarkable. "Here at once is seen remarkable. "Here at once is seen the true nature of Abram, which makes him the father of all believers. Jahveh has commanded, he replies by the obedience of

Franz Delitzsch (1813-90)

[44] Sailhamer; 141.

faith, he acts blindly according to God's directions, commending himself to His guidance."[45]

Delitzsch may be overstating the case here, though, and failing to recognize that biblical faith demands specific content, content that has not yet been fully revealed to Abram thus far in the narrative. The context of the covenant reiteration in Genesis 15 is specifically that of the promise of a son to Abram, whereas, while this is implied in Genesis 12, it is not explicitly stated. We must not forget the overarching salvific theme of the Seed of Woman thus far traced in the book of Genesis, which lies behind the specific calling and covenanting of Abram. John Calvin notes, "In understanding faith, it is not merely a question of knowing that God exists, but also – and this especially – of knowing what is His will toward us."[46] Something in the voice that Abram heard while in Haran left no room for disobedience, but true faith may not have come until the more specific promises recorded in Genesis 15. Thus Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown comment,

> It is not to be supposed that at this stage he knew exactly the purposes for which he was separated, or could clearly distinguish the spiritual from the temporal branches of the Promise. But in the consciousness of supernatural guidance, and with the hope of great, though unknown blessings, he 'departed as the Lord had spoken unto him'[47]

Abram departed from Haran not as a mere handful of people, but rather – and the text certainly reads this way – as a fairly significant caravan of dependents. The notables, of course, are Abram himself, his wife Sarai, and his nephew Lot. This latter personage is somewhat of a mystery – *why* did Abram bring along his nephew? If Terah were still living, as it appears that he was, then Lot could easily have stayed with his grandfather in Haran. Even if Terah had

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[45] Delitzsch; 380.
[46] Calvin, John *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.1.4.
[47] Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown; 130.

already died, it appears that at some point in Terah's settlement in Haran, his other son Nahor made the journey from Ur and was then dwelling in Haran – Lot could have remained in Haran with family. This question becomes more than academic when one considers the relationship between Abram and Lot, and between their descendants. Conflict arises quickly between the entourage surrounding Abram and that surrounding his nephew, and conflict will follow the life of Lot throughout the patriarchal narratives and beyond. Lot's sons will be the progenitors of two peoples – Ammon and Moab - whose inveterate hatred and oppression of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – the Israelites – will be frequently noted in the biblical history. We cannot help but wonder why God allowed Abram to take along his nephew, or why Abram chose to do so.

The logical setting for attempting to answer this question is not here in Chapter 12, where Lot is simply mentioned as among the caravan departing from Haran toward Canaan, but rather in the next chapter, where conflict between the uncle and the nephew first brews. Thus we will leave til then a more thorough discussion of the person Lot, his faith or lack thereof, and the implications of his presence alongside Abram in the early patriarchal narratives.

Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. Now the Canaanite was then in the land. **(12:6)**

The consistent hermeneutical difficulty with this otherwise straightforward verse is the phrase, "*now the Canaanite was then in the land.*" As he was traveling to *Canaan*, it seems somewhat obvious that the *Canaanite* would be in the land, and commentators have offered many different opinions as to what the purpose of this reference must be. If, as modern archaeologists have discovered, the peoples displaced by the children of Israel under Joshua's leadership were themselves Semitic tribes, then this verse in Genesis 12 might represent a significant marker to those who would be reading the narrative from Moses' pen. It would signify that the land into which their father Abraham was

entering was as hostile as could be imagined – not only a strange terrain, but a strange people, the descendants of Ham and not of Shem. This notation that the Canaanite was then in the land would indicate "how unfree and unsuitable" the land was for Abraham.[48]

Another manner of interpreting the verse is to connect it, rather than contrast it, with the time in which the narrative was being written. In other words, Moses may be indicating that the inhabitants of the land – who were to be displaced by the children of Israel as they entered to claim their promised inheritance from Abraham – were already in the land when the patriarch entered so many centuries before. Thus the reference to 'Canaanite' is not so much an indication of ethnicity – whether of Ham or of Shem – but rather an indication that these tribes were already in possession of a land that was to become the property of Israel under God. Thus the second part of verse 6 is a natural prelude to the promise beginning in verse 7. "The land was in the possession of the Canaanites, but Abram was in spirit to see in it his inheritance."[49]

The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him. **(12:7)**

Other than in the Garden of Eden, this verse represents the first theophany recorded in Scripure. The significance of the theophany – the *visible manifestation of God* – cannot be underrated with regard to our understanding of the Old Testament narratives. God *appeared* to various men throughout the history of redemptive revelation, and was especially frequent in doing so to Abraham. What form did God take in these appearances? Nothing is said here in Genesis 12 regarding what it was that Abram saw, but comparison with other passages within and without the patriarchal narratives will fairly convince that the appearance of God was usually that of a man, though often one so magnificent that the beholder could not stand the sight. Thus one biblical

[48] Von Rad; *Genesis*; 162.
[49] Delitzsch; 382.

dictionary defines theophany as a "Manifestation of God that is tangible to the human senses. In its most restrictive sense, it is a visible appearance of God in the Old Testament period often, but not always, in human form."[50]

Again, we cannot assume that this visible manifestation of Jehovah was sufficient to instill saving faith within the heart of Abram – the countless miracles and manifestations of divinity in our Lord's life and ministry did not result in faith for the majority of those who beheld them. Yet we can see and say that Abram recognized just *who* it was that had appeared and spoken to him, and he reacted in the manner common to antiquity – he erected an altar at the place as a memorial of the event. This altar, and the others about which we read in the patriarchal narratives, are the 'flags' by which the progenitors of the Israelite nation 'staked out' their claim on the land promised to them by God.

Abram seems to take in stride the element of futurity in the Lord's words – *to your descendants,* literally, *your seed*. It was and remains the nature of the people of the Middle East to think far more generationally than the people of the West, and a promise to one's furture descendants was every bit a promise of the present, as it secured one's posterity and legacy. This is not to minimize Abram's faith at this point, for he certainly had nothing in his own *Sitz im Leben* to lend outward credence to the promise. He had no son, indeed no children at all, and therefore no 'descendants' upon whom to bequeath the land God was promising him. Yet the magnitude of the event – the *theophany* – apparently precluded doubt in the content of the promise, and Abram built an altar to commemorate the appearance as well as the promise.

> That land his posterity was for centuries to inhabit as a peculiar people; the seeds of divine knowledge were to be sown there for the benefit of all mankind; and, considered in its geographical situation, it was chosen in divine wisdom the

[50] Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology; http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/bakers-evangelical-dictionary/theophany.html

> fittest of all lands to serve as the cradle of a divine revelation designed for the whole world.[51]

Then he proceeded from there to the mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD. Abram journeyed on, continuing toward the Negev. **(12:8-9)**

The initial reconnaissance mission continues, as we have summarized earlier, with Abram's move from Shechem to Bethel/Ai. The phrase that jumps out at the reader from this section of the narrative is that which refers to Abram *calling upon the name of the LORD*. The language is reminiscent, and undoubtedly meant to be reminiscent, of Genesis 4:26.[52]

> *To Seth, to him also a son was born; and he called his name Enosh. Then men began to* ***call upon the name of the LORD.*** (Genesis 4:26)

Except for the plural in Genesis 4:26 and the singular in Genesis 12:8, the phraseology in the Hebrew is identical between the two places, clearly indicating an activity that was the same in one instance as it was in the other. In our review of Chapter 4, the conclusion arrived at was that the phrase indicated a settled and stated form of worship of Jehovah,

> It is most reasonable, therefore, to conclude that in the days of Enosh men – and we also have to assume these men were predominantly if not entirely of the lineage of Seth – began to worship the Lord in a more settled manner. This possibly would include a stated time of worship (perhaps the beginning of the Sabbath service?), as well as a more recognized clergy. This interpretation is at least hinted at by the facts that in the New Testament, Enoch is called a prophet (Jude 14) and Noah a 'preacher of righteousness' (II Peter 2:5).[53]

Several commentators – most significantly Delitzsch and, before him, Martin Luther – interpret the phrase 'call upon' in Genesis as referring to the

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[51] Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown; 131.
[52] *Cp.* Genesis 26:25 where Abraham's son, Isaac, erects an altar in Beersheba and 'calls upon the name of the LORD.'
[53] Plumb Line Study Notes; Genesis Part II.

preaching of the Gospel to the heathen. But we are never told that Abram was a preacher (though later the Lord will call him a 'prophet'), nor may we conclude that his knowledge of Jehovah was sufficient at this time for him to be a preacher. And while we are told that the Scriptures beforehand *preached the Gospel unto Abraham* (Gal. 3:8), we are nowhere told that he preached the Gospel to the heathen nations around him. This is not to say that he did not; it is merely to say that the biblical record is silent on this matter.

A more reasonable interpretation, if a more specific activity be sought than that of general 'worship,' would be to see 'calling upon the name of the LORD' as the act of prayer. This is particularly true in Scripture with regard to the 'invocation' prayer – calling on God for assistance and blessing as one moves about in life. It may be that by the time Abram had journeyed half the distance through Canaan, he was convinced of at least two things. First, that the voice that he had first heard, and the appearance that came to him in Shechem, belonged to a deity who was to be trusted above all others, perhaps even to the exclusion of all others. Second, Abram was learning that the nature of his situation, and of the promise given to him by God, clearly indicated that he would need a great deal of help from God if everything were to turn out alright. To be sure, he would forget this lesson several times during the rest of his life (and one of those times immediately following), but Abram was learning that the One to trust and to call upon was the LORD.

The similarity between this passage and the earlier one in Genesis 4 falls in line with the literary parallel between the lineage of Adam through Seth and that of Noah through Shem. Abram begins a new phase of the unfolding revelation of the Seed promised in Genesis 3, having been separated by God from among the pagan idolaters that were his kin. The character of the lineage that is to follow, as with the character of the lineage that was to follow Seth, is set forth at the beginning: *and he called upon the name of the LORD*. The lineage of Abram was to be a holy line, as was the lineage of Seth, though that is not to say

that each and every man within the separated genealogy would be holy. Rather it is to mark for the reader the channel of divine revelation and blessing, and of the lineage of preservation of the promised Seed. God would suffer the nations to go their own way, while He establishes a line of communication between Himself and a separated people. Thus Abram *called upon the name of the LORD*, though subsequent events will show that he as yet did not fully understand what that meant.

Sister Sarai (and Sister Rebekah):

It came about when he came near to Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, "See now, I know that you are a beautiful woman; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife'; and they will kill me, but they will let you live. Please say that you are my sister so that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may live on account of you." **(12:11-13)**

The reader who professes to have no difficulty with the 'sister acts' within the patriarchal narratives is either not very inquisitive, or not being honest. Three times a patriarch will pass off his wife as his sister, in order to save his own neck, and at the very real danger of his wife's integrity being completely destroyed. Twice does Abram pass Sarai off as his sister (the second time explaining that she is, in fact, a 'sister' to him) and once does Isaac do so with regard to Rebekah. Oddly, in one of the instances involving Sarai and in the instance involving Rebekah, the king who was deceived and potentially condemned was Abimelech, the king of Gerar. This fact has caused many commentators to bring together at least these two renditions of the story line and to say that they are one and the same narrative, whether true to history or not.

We can dispose of this objection fairly easily, as the term 'Abimelech' is not, in fact, a proper name but rather a royal title similar to the term 'Pharaoh.' *Abimelech* literally means 'my father the king,' and could very well have been the royal designation of all of the Philistine kings of Gerar, just as *Pharaoh* was the title given to all the kings of Egypt, even when those kings were Semitic or Greek

and not Egyptian. While we must admit that the repetition of what appears to be the same plotline, three times in the life narratives of Abraham and Isaac, is noteworthy, we need not conclude that the 'Abimelech' of Isaac's day was the same as the 'Abimelech' of his father's.

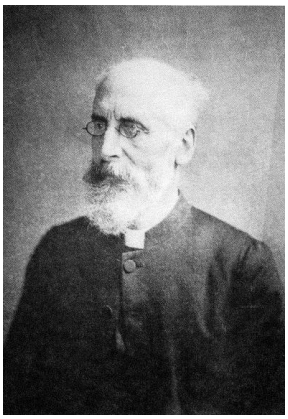
Culturally Acceptable – Morally Reprehensible

The fear claimed by Abram and by Isaac was very real in their day, for it was culturally acceptable for the ruler of a land to take the wife of a sojourner from her husband, and often to kill the husband in the bargain. Again, culturally, such violent treatment would rarely befall a brother, for the brother of the desired woman stood in the place of her father and was to be honored and, frankly, bribed for the hand of his sister. Thus Abram was being a bit too subtle when he said to Sarai, "*Please say that you are my sister so that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may live on account of you.*" (12:13) These two phrases – *that it may go well with me* and *that I may live* – are not exactly synonymous. Abram wished not to be killed on account of his beautiful wife, to be sure, but he also anticipated gaining more than just his life if the ruler of the land considered that Sarai was his sister. "He hopes not only for safety, but for prosperity, from Sarai's saying that she is his sister."[54] And his scheme worked, at least from a human perspective. When Sarai's beauty was brought to Pharaoh's attention, he indeed desired her for his harem, and plied her 'brother' with great riches.

> *It came about when Abram came into Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. Pharaoh's officials saw her and praised her to Pharaoh; and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. Therefore he treated Abram well for her sake; and gave him sheep and oxen and donkeys and male and female servants and female donkeys and camels.* (12:14-16)

[54] Delitzsch; 335.

Alfred Edersheim speculates somewhat as to the mind of Abram at this time, but not with regard to the danger in which the patriarch had placed not only his wife, but the entire purpose of redemption through the promised Seed.



Alfred Edersheim (1825-89)

"As the future brother-in-law of the king, Abram now rapidly acquired possessions and wealth. These presents Abram could, of course, not refuse, though they increased his guilt, as well as his remorse and sense of shame. But he had committed himself too deeply to retrace his steps; and the want of faith, which had at the first given rise to his fears, may have gone on increasing. Abram had given up for a time the promised land, and he was now in danger of losing also the yet greater promise."[55]

What is the reader to make of this episode in Abram's life? Can what he did be justified in any manner? The lack of faith displayed by the 'father of the faithful' is quite profound, beginning perhaps even with his departure from Canaan to go to Egypt on account of the famine. Moses seems to rationalize Abram's self-imposed exile from the land of the promise, by adding, *"for the famine was severe in the land."* Yet it seems odd that God would lead the patriarch into the land that He was promising to give to Abram's descendants, and then to lead him out of that land in what seems to be very short order. Commentators have shied away from granting approval upon Abram's decision to sojourn in Egypt, a conclusion based primarily on the biblical attitude toward 'Egypt' as a consistently negative place.

But even if we countenance Abram's trip to Egypt, is there any way his behavior with respect to Sarai can be rationalized? Even praised? It is remarkable how many commentators do seek to justify Abram's actions; it is even more so to find several who seek to praise them. In the first category we find John Calvin, who begins his analysis of the event by chastising Abram for

[55] Edersheim, Alfred *Bible History: Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendricksen Publishers; 1995); 57.

the exposing of his wife to moral compromise and sin. Abram abdicates his duty as husband, and chooses rather the safety of the brother. "For when he dissembles the fact, that she was his wife, he deprives her chastity of its legitimate defence."[56] Calvin goes on to 'praise' Abram for choosing rather to go down to Egypt than to return to the land of his upbringing – either Haran or Ur – and justifies Abram's actions with respect to Sarai on the basis of the patriarch's unswerving dedication to the word of God, whereby he understood his life to be of paramount importance to the unfolding plan of God. Calvin embarks upon a flight of fancy when he writes,

> Since, therefore, he never allowed his senses to swerve from the word of God, we may even thence gather the reason, why he so greatly feared for his own life, as to attempt the preservation of it from one danger, by incurring a still greater. Undoubtedly he would have chosen to die a hundred times, rather than thus to ruin the character of his wife, and to be deprived of the society of her whom alone he loved. But while he reflected that the hope of salvation was centered in *himself*, that *he* was the fountain of the Church of God, that unless *he* lived, the benediction promised to him, and to his seed, was vain…inasmuch as he did not wish the effect of the divine vocation to perish through his death, he was so affected with concern for the preservation of his own life, that he overlooked every thing besides.[57]

Thus Calvin almost justifies Abram's actions, and in doing so goes far beyond what is written in the text itself. The Genevan theologian does seem to catch himself, as his comments move on, and he never fully countenances Abram's actions as *moral*, or as anything less than deceitful and sinful.

> But in devising this indirect method, by which he subjected his wife to the peril of adultery, he seems to be by no means excusable. If he was solicitous about his own life, which he might justly be, yet he ought to have cast his care upon God. The providence of God, I grant, does not indeed preclude the faithful from caring

[56] Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*; 359.
[57] *Idem*.

> for themselves; but let them do it in such a way, that they may not overstep their prescribed bounds.[58]

Calvin's contemporary, Martin Luther, does not exercise the restraint that his Genevan colleague does, and his comments on this passage conclude that Abram's actions were by no means sinful, and were in fact, praiseworthy. After a brief summary of Augustine's consideration regarding the 'three types of lies,' Luther states that Abram's deception was a 'lie of ministering,' which he says, "deserves praise."[59] He adds, quite remarkably,

> But here a new thought comes to me, according to which I hold that Abraham did not sin at all nor that his faith became weak. He rather gave this advise (to Sarah) because of his very strong faith and by inspiration of the Holy Ghost. If someone should ask how this could be, I reply that Abraham was full of faith, and though he was facing many dangers, yet he held to the promise, fully assured that it would be kept for him and his descendants, but in such a way that it was, at is were, attached to his body. For this reason he sought every means to preserve his life. He was not afraid to die, but he did not want the promise to be voided by any carelessness on his part. For this reason also he asked Sarai to help him save his life, trusting that God would keep her from disgrace…I like this explanation much better.[60]

Luther's reasoning seems to apply to Abram the mindset that Paul would Later condemn, *"Let us do evil, that good may come!"* C. F. Keil, himself a Lutheran scholar, is on firmer ground as he surmises a possible motive for Abram's actions, without in any manner rationalizing the sin involved in what Abram did. Keil writes, "He [Abram] might possibly hope, that by means of the plan concerted, he should escape the danger of being put to death on account of his wife, if any one should

C. F. Keil (1807-88)

[58] *Ibid.*; 360.
[59] Luther, Martin *Commentary on Genesis; Volume I* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House; 1958); 226.
[60] *Idem.*

wish to take her; but how he expected to save the honour and retain possession of his wife, we cannot understand, though we must assume, that he thought he should be able to protect her and keep her as his sister more easily than if he acknowledged her as his wife."[61] But Delitzsch sums up the moral content of Abram's behavior most succinctly, "He acts shrewdly, but through weakness of faith immorally."[62]


Charles Simeon (1759-1836)

The major problem with all attempts to find good reason for Abram's behavior – besides the obvious fact that Scripture nowhere defends the patriarch's deception, which is patently wicked – is that the overarching theological message of the passage (as well as the corresponding events with regard to Abimelech) is completely missed. First, with regard to the biblical record itself, we must recognize with Charles Simeon the remarkable honesty of the biblical record, "We admire the fidelity of Scripture history. There is not a saint, however eminent, but his faults are reported as faithfully as his virtues. And we are constrained to acknowledge, that the best of men, when they come into temptation, are weak and fallible as others."[63]

This un-legendlike honesty concerning the sins of the fathers is purposeful. We are never led to praise the men, but always to praise the God whose purposes are fulfilled *in spite* of the sinful machinations of his human instruments. In each of the 'sister/wife' episodes, it is the intervention of God that preserves the integrity of the wife, and of the covenant promise, despite the immoral and weak behavior of the husband. We are taught by these events that the security of the covenant is *never* left to the faithfulness of the human partner, but at all times rests upon the faithfulness of God who alone makes and

[61] Keil & Delitzsch; 197.
[62] Delitzsch; 385.
[63] Simeon, Charles *Expository Outlines on the Whole Bible; Volume 1* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House; 1956); 163.

guarantees the covenant. As Paul elsewhere reminds us, as a trustworthy statement, *"If we are faithless, He remains faithful; for He cannot deny Himself."*[64] Andrew Fuller writes thoughtfully, "In how many instances has God, by his kind providences, extricated us from situations into which our own sin and folly had plunged us!"[65]

Then Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her and go." Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him; and they escorted him away, with his wife and all that belonged to him. **(12:18-20)**

Abram's is rebuked by Pharaoh – an embarrassing situation indeed for the father of the faithful to endure! Yet God's faithfulness not only protected Sarai, and preserved the lineage of the Seed pure and undefiled; it also sent Abram out of Egypt wealthier than when he arrived. In a microcosm of events to come, Abram 'plundered' Egypt, as his descendants would do on a much larger scale when they departed Egypt, *en masse*, centuries later. Abram's sin abounded in this part of his story, and God's grace much more abounded. Scripture does not glorify the men chosen by God to be His vessels of grace and mercy, but at all times and only glorifies the God who thus chooses. Abram's sin is on full display in this passage, but "The fact…is related to us, not so much for Abram's dishonor as for God's glory."[66]

[64] II Timothy 2:13
[65] Fuller; 54.
[66] Delitzsch; 387.

Week 5: A Lot of Trouble

Text Reading: Genesis 13:1 - 18

"In all our choices this principle should overrule us. That that is best for us which is best for our souls."
(Matthew Henry)

One of the central features of Covenant Theology is the manner in which God deals with the *family*. This facet of the theological system is, of course, essential to its defense of paedo-baptism, and it takes as its starting point the covenant sign of circumcision given to Abraham. Other passages, such as Acts 2:39 and I Corinthians 7:14 are enlisted in support of the doctrine, but its foundation rests firmly upon the covenantal interpretation of the sign of circumcision and upon the 'nature' of God's dealing with man in and through the family. Yet the patriarchal narratives may be seen to prove a different truth, one that is spoken of by our Lord himself,

> *Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to SET A MAN AGAINST HIS FATHER, AND A DAUGHTER AGAINST HER MOTHER, AND A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW AGAINST HER MOTHER-IN-LAW; and A MAN'S ENEMIES WILL BE THE MEMBERS OF HIS HOUSEHOLD.*
>
> (Matthew 10:34-36)

The Gospel cuts at an unexpected angle, and those who are included are often very close intimates with those who are excluded. "*Two men shall be in the field, one will be taken and one left…*" And we must not lose sight of the fact, established by Paul in his letter to the Galatians, that what we are dealing with in the historical narrative of Abraham is, indeed, the Gospel.

> *And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the nations shall be blessed in you.'*
>
> (Galatians 3:8)

The participation of Abram's nephew, Lot, in the events of the early years of the Abrahamic narrative serve as an historical example of the principle that the call of God cuts right through familial ties. This is not to say that the Lot himself was not saved – more on that issue a little later in this lesson. It is to say, however, that although Lot traveled with his uncle (and grandfather) from Ur to Haran, and then from Haran to Canaan (and down to Egypt, too) with Abram, he *was not* a participant in the covenant that God established with Abram. Indeed, it is hard to see from the narratives that Lot himself was the least bit concerned with the covenant, assuming, of course, that he knew about it. This characteristic regarding the historical narrative of Abram/Abraham brings the reader to another of the literary parallels that are so important to the reading and understanding of the patriarchal narratives: the *family division* caused by the covenant.

Moses makes an unusual effort to show that Lot was related to Abram in a very close manner – the son of Abram's deceased brother Haran, the grandson of Abram's father Terah, etc. Lot travels with Abram wherever the patriarch goes, suffering and prospering with his uncle at least through the early phase of their journeying. They part company, the subject matter of Chapter 13, but Lot does not leave the sphere of Abram's life. Nor do his descendants cease to be a factor in the lives of Abram's descendants. The family relationship is close – uncle to nephew, which is especially close in the culture of the Middle East. But the covenant cuts between Abram and Lot, and the subsequent narrative proves this fact: the covenant is with Abram and not with Lot. Indeed, as will be seen in the parallelism, Lot has no claim to the covenant by birthright, and apparently little interest in the covenant.

Uncle-to-nephew is a close relationship, but not as close as brother-to-brother. Later in the Abrahamic narrative we will see the covenant sword cutting between these two as well, in Ishmael and Isaac. Christians often dismiss Ishmael as an outlier to the story, forgetting that he was from Abraham's loins;

he was biologically Abraham's son, and culturally he was also Sarah's son. Yet it is clear that Ishmael is not part of the covenant, as the following exchange between God and Abraham manifests,

> *And Abraham said to God, "**Oh that Ishmael might live before You!**" But God said, "No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. **But My covenant I will establish with Isaac**, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year."*
>
> (Genesis 17:18-21)

Ishmael was thirteen years old when his half-brother Isaac was born, and as the younger grew the older mocked him and despised him, probably recognizing that in the son of Sarah was the end of his hopes to inherits his father's wealth. In the narratives, however, there is no indication that Ishmael concerned himself with the covenant of his father Abraham; he was as dead to it, as far as the reader can tell.

Ishmael and Isaac were half-brothers, sons of the same father. But can any relationship be closer than that of twin brothers? Still the sword of the covenant is sharp enough to cut right between even this biological tie, and that while still in the womb. Jacob and Esau, of course, are who we refer to, the first of whom God loved, the second He hated. The election of God cut through the relationship of uncle-to-nephew, and of half-brother to half-brother, and here, of twin brothers. Esau becomes famous from the patriarchal narratives as being the one who not only was uninterested in the covenant of his father, but who despisingly sold his birthright for a bowl of stew, saying, "*What is that to me, seeing that I am starving.*" Later Esau would lose the blessing of the firstborn, a victim of his mother's and his brother's deception. But this was - though not in form, yet so in result – the accomplishment of God's providence, for it was said of the twins while they were yet in the womb,

> *Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples shall be separated from your body;*
> *And one people shall be stronger than the other;*
> *And the older shall serve the younger.* (Genesis 25:23)

Thus the participation of Lot in the Abrahamic narrative is purposed more than just for historical development; it also teaches the timeless truth that the election of God cannot be isolated or guaranteed to familial relationships, no matter how much we desire that it should be. The blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant flow to all who are touched by its reach, as has been shown abundantly in world history and especially since the Advent of Christ. God prospered Lot along with Abram as the two sojourned in Egypt. God promised to bless Ishmael and make of him a mighty nation, as He subsequently did of Esau. This translates to blessing to the children of the covenant – to the children of believers – without at the same time granting covenant membership to those children simply upon biological grounds. This overarching division of covenant participation between Abram and Lot, between Isaac and Ishmael, and between Jacob and Esau, did not preclude members of the 'out' nations from joining themselves to the 'in' nation – but the examples are few and far between.

Lot himself may be such an example. As we review the narrative on the nephew of Abram, we cannot be impressed by his choices and behavior. Yet we have the enigmatic passage from II Peter to deal with as we seek to consider Lot's character, and his *personal* relationship to the God of Abraham.

> *…and if He rescued **righteous Lot**, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men (for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day by their lawless deeds), then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority.*
>
> (II Peter 2:7-10)

This passage presents the reader of the Abrahamic narratives with a definite problem, for Lot does not come from those pages a 'righteous' man at all.

The exegesis of II Peter 2:7-10 involves both biblical-historical as well as literary analysis, as it appears that the apostle is pulling from non-canonical works in his assessment of Lot. Still, a generous assessment of Lot's character will conclude that he did not acquiesce to the cultural standards – or lack thereof – of the city he adopted. It remains both true and important, however, that Sodom was the city of his choice, and that is a major lesson from the life of Lot.

Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold. He went on his journeys from the Negev as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place of the altar which he had made there formerly; and there Abram called on the name of the LORD. Now Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. And the land could not sustain them while dwelling together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to remain together. And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock. Now the Canaanite and the Perizzite were dwelling then in the land. **(13:2-7)**

Thus far Abram's nephew has played no significant role in the narrative, nor will he play the protagonist in any portion of the ensuing narrative. He is, as it were, along for the ride, and apparently benefits greatly by his association with Abram. We are not told how it came to be that Lot secured such wealth, though we can assume that he also benefited from his uncle's subterfuge in Egypt in regard to Sarai. Be that as it may, the growing prosperity of these two men is becoming like two expanding balloons, each seeking to occupy the same volume. *"The land could not sustain them,"* literally, could not 'bear up' under the weight of their combined wealth.

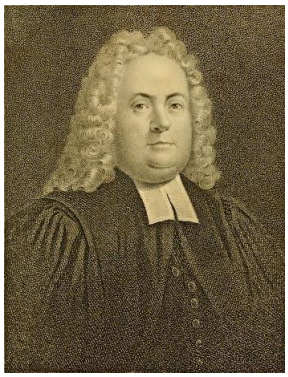
Wealth in the Ancient Near East rarely consisted in fungible currency or valuable specie. Rather it took the form of servants and slaves, and herds of livestock. Abram's wealth could not be held in a bank safe deposit box or in a vault in the midst of his tent; it spread out across the land as it grew, and the same was true with respect to the prosperity of Lot. Limited resources – pasture land and water of greatest need – were severely taxed by two tribal leaders attempting to situate themselves in the same territory. This led to inevitable

strife between the servants of Abram and those of Lot, both groups looking out for the interests of their own master.

The mention of the Canaanite and the Perizzite then dwelling in the land is somewhat enigmatic. It may serve to indicate that there was even more pressure upon the limited resources due to the presence of these other tribes, or it may indicate that these pagan tribes might observe the strife between Abram and Lot – or at least between their servants – and attempt to exploit the conflict for their own aggrandizement. The net result, however, is clear: Abram recognizes the danger, and steps forward to propose a solution.

So Abram said to Lot, "Please let there be no strife between you and me, nor between my herdsmen and your herdsmen, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me; if to the left, then I will go to the right; or if to the right, then I will go to the left." **(13:8-9)**

This proposition made by Abram is quite remarkable. All commentators agree that the patriarch is painted in the most admirable colors in this passage, wherein he adopts the position of suppliant, though he is the elder and the leader of the tribe. Abram also offers Lot his choice of the land, which was promised by God to Abram as part of the covenantal call. Lot was to choose first, then Abram would take the opposite course, so that their respective entourages would stay out of contact and out of conflict. Thus Abram shows himself to be the consummate peacemaker, willing to suffer loss in order to maintain peace between brethren. Matthew Henry comments, "Though God had promised to give this land to his seed, and it does not appear that ever any such promise was made to Lot, which Abram might have insisted on, to the total exclusion of Lot, yet he allows him to come in partner with him, and tenders an equal share to one that had not an equal right."[67]



Matthew Henry (1662-1714)

[67] Henry, Matthew *Commentary on the Whole Bible; Volume 1* (np: Hendrickson Publishers; 1991); 74.

Some commentators see in Abram's offer another endangering of the covenant fulfillment – the tendering of some of the promised land being tantamount to the endangering of the promised seed through the deception in Egypt. This is perhaps reading too much into the narrative, though one may reasonably conclude that Abram had not given the matter a great deal of thought. His concern with regard to the covenant promises will grow as the narrative progresses, and will be even more powerful when he himself has offspring. But for now it seems the issue was maintaining the peace between two closely related branches of the same family.

It was, and remains, common in the Bedouin communities for brothers to part from each other when their respective herds and herdsmen become too numerous for peaceful cohabitation, with the understanding that one brother will come to the other's aid should the other be threatened by an enemy outside the tribe. We can surmise that Abram had this idea of mutual separation with implicit alliance in mind when he proposed that he and Lot separate. From such arrangements nations have grown in the Near East, though it is also true that some of the separated branches have subsequently declined into oblivion. Lot's trajectory will prove to be vastly different from his uncles, though two nations will arise from his loins.

Lot lifted up his eyes and saw all the valley of the Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere—this was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah—like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt as you go to Zoar. So Lot chose for himself all the valley of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward. Thus they separated from each other. Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled in the cities of the valley, and moved his tents as far as Sodom. Now the men of Sodom were wicked exceedingly and sinners against the LORD. **(13:10-13)**

Commentators find little good to say about Lot's response to Abram's offer, nor concerning the younger man's selection process. No doubt Abram's proposal found favor with Lot, and the nephew quickly surveyed the land from the commanding heights of Bethel, and just as quickly made his choice as to

where he would move his caravan. Lot's response is immediately reprehensible, as it betrays no honor toward the older man – his uncle who was effectively his father. Henry writes, "…we find not any instance of deference or respect to his uncle in the whole management. Abram having offered him the choice, without compliment he accepted it and made his election. Passion and selfishness make men rude."[68] Lot's behavior would be considered rude even in our day, though not as scandalous as it must have been at the time, or even in the same region of the world today. Deference and respect to one's elders, and especially to one's father, is still woven into the social mores of the Middle East. Lot knew none of these niceties, but he knew what he wanted in a land.

Lot's choice was based entirely on the appearance of the land he surveyed, and not at all on the moral quality of the inhabitants of that land. It is not to be supposed that the children of God must shun all unbelieving society in order to live in covenant with God; that is not the lesson of this passage. The men of Sodom were not mere unbelievers, they were *exceedingly wicked and sinners* (literally) *before the face of Jehovah.* "The men of Sodom were sinners of the first magnitude, *sinner before the Lord*, that is, impudent and daring sinners."[69] Calvin writes of Moses' description, "…for he means that they were not merely under the dominion of those common vices which everywhere prevail among men, but were abandoned to most execrable crimes, the cry of which rose even to heaven, (as we shall afterward see) and demanded vengeance from God."[70]

It would be naïve to think that Lot and Abram were unaware of the character of the Sodomites, and of their neighbors in Gomorrah. The ancient world was well connected via the daily trade and movement among the caravans and flocks; news traveled quickly, and Moses' comment was not merely a postscript. No, Lot's movement away from Abram followed the time-proven

[68] Henry; 74.
[69] *Ibid.*; 75.
[70] Calvin's Commentary on Genesis; 374.

pattern of sin, "*But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has been conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.*"[71] Lot chose by the appearance of things, and would soon find himself ensnared in the world's tribulation, suffering greatly for the folly of his choice.

If we think as well of Lot as we can, we may assume that he suffered rather from naiveté than from overt wickedness. Considering his own needs, and perhaps his natural desire to see his own possessions multiplied, Lot selected the most fertile and well-watered land from among the regions offered to him by his uncle. But that fertile land came with all of the troubles associated with material prosperity in a fallen world: political competition and conflict, as well as moral degradation. Lot and his family would be caught up in the regional wars that proliferated annually ("*the season when kings go out to war*"), and we next find him as a captive of the kings led by Chedorlaomer, the king of Elam. We have no indication that Lot himself took part in the war, yet he nonetheless suffered the consequence of living in the region of the defeated kings of Sodom and Gomorrah. When Abram last saw Lot, the nephew had "*pitched his tents as far as Sodom.*" He was, therefore, in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Lot's biological association with Abram would prove helpful at this time as before (and later). Abram will rescue his nephew and will restore the younger's man's possessions and persons to him. But Lot did not learn his lesson – or if he learned anything, it was the wrong conclusion. For when we next hear of him, he has no longer merely pitched his tents as far as Sodom, he is now dwelling within the city walls. Perhaps he felt safer within the walls, having been taken captive while living outside of them. It is apparent, regardless, that Lot did not consider moving from the region completely, and consequently he remained in the very same trap, moving from the political to the moral quagmire that was Sodom. We know the outcome: Sodom was destroyed

[71] James 1:14-15

by the wrath of God, with Lot, his wife, and their two daughters alone escaping the catastrophe. Lot's wife famously 'looked back' upon the world as it was in Sodom, and was instantly turned into a pillar of salt.

Lot's self-inflicted troubles did not end there. Our last encounter with Abram's nephew will be in the sordid aftermath of Sodom's destruction (fleeing from which, Lot still managed to beg the angels to allow him to turn aside to a nearby village rather than to flee the region completely). As their prospective husbands – evidently men of Sodom – refused to leave the city before its destruction, Lot's daughters sought their own devices to continue the lineage of their father. Thus from the incestuous relations between father and daughters came two nations who would prove to be inveterate enemies to the descendants of Abraham – both Moab and Ammon were sons of Lot, and the nations that grew from them sought to prevent the children of Israel from entering the Promised Land under Moses and Joshua, and would continue to be enemies of Israel throughout their corresponding national lives. All of this because, "*Lot lifted up his eyes and beheld…*"

The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever. I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth, so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered."

(13:14-16)

The literary quality of the patriarchal narratives is stunning, and often overlooked. Just a subtle repetition of a verb, with a profound change in the subject, establishes the abiding difference between one who walks by faith and one who walks by sight. Lot *lifted up* his own eyes, but *the LORD* told Abram to 'lift up your eyes.' Once again we see a principle at work that is elucidated by James in his short letter, "*Humble yourself in the presence of the Lord, and he will exalt you.*"[72] We cannot tell if Abram understood this principle yet, but it is the

[72] James 4:10

evidence of divine grace that the principle is at work even though the beneficiaries are unaware that it even exists. The bottom line, however, was "Lot chose for himself, Jahweh chooses for Abram."[73]

Another principle is operating in this passage as well, a covenantal principle that is encompassed in the frequent refrain, "*Come out from among them and be separate, and I shall be your God, and you shall be My people.*" Separation is of the essence of the covenant call, and the process of bringing Abram up in the covenant required further separation. Having separated from his land and his father, Abram was now willing to separate from the last vestige of his lineage beyond that which might (hopefully?) come from his own loins. "From this we may see that the separation of Lot was in accordance with the will of God, as Lot had no share in the promise of God."[74]

The development of the covenant in terms of content, will parallel a deepening separatedness of Abram with the world, and particularly with that part of the world naturally most dear to him. "For being now separated from the last of his kindred, as well as his father's house, a new and greater development of the divine promise was made to him."[75] This pattern looks ahead to the ultimate statement of the covenant promise, which was to come many years yet in the future, on Mt. Moriah. John Sailhamer comments,

> Just as the first statement of the promise was preceded by Abraham's separation from among the nations and from his father's house, so the second statement of the promise is put in the context of Abraham's separation from his closest kin, Lot. It is not without purpose that the final statement of the promise to Abraham comes immediately after he has demonstrated his willingness to be separated from his only son and heir, Isaac.[76]

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[73] Delitzsch; 392
[74] Keil & Delitzsch; 200.
[75] Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown; 135.
[76] Sailhamer; 143.

Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you." Then Abram moved his tent and came and dwelt by the oaks of Mamre, which are in Hebron, and there he built an altar to the LORD. **(13:17-18)**

As the covenant language will expand along the progression of the patriarchal narrative, particularly the history concerning Abraham, it may be useful to parallel the first two announcements – here in Chapter 13, and previously in Chapter 12. In the first place, we see the expansion of the covenant promise in Chapter 13 as the fulfillment of that aspect of the earlier announcement, "*Go forth from your country…to a land which I will show you.*" Now, after the parting of Lot from Abram, God is ready to indeed show Abram the land of the promise. The closing verses of Chapter 13 represent another 'walkabout' for the patriarch, only this time on a much more circuitous route whereby he was to walk the *length and breadth* of the land, essentially claiming it as his inheritance from the Lord God. Thus the possession of the land becomes an integral part of the Abrahamic Covenant, and a continuing point of contention among biblical scholars as to the perpetuity of that promises possession.

The earlier announcement of the covenant is expanded also as to the feature that was undoubtedly of most importance to Abram himself: the promise of a *seed.* Earlier the patriarch was promised that he would become a great nation. But such a promise could be construed as capable of fulfillment without the man actually having a son himself. George Washington is considered to the Father of the United States, though he had no children of his own. But for Abram, in the time and the world in which he lived, such a promise would have rung hollow – it has been the perpetual characteristic of human society that a man's legacy lives on in his own children, and particularly in his sons.

Abram had just separated from the one person on earth who could at least legally be considered a 'son,' Lot. According to a pattern that will continue throughout the patriarchal narratives, God chooses the point of least expectation to increase the anticipated content of the promise: "*And I will make your seed as the*

dust of the earth; so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your seed can also be numbered." Possession of the land, and an innumerable seed, were promises granted to Abram toward the beginning of his sojourn in Canaan, to be held in abeyance until many generations later. Explicit fulfillment of these promises came during the reign of Solomon, just before the division of the nation into two kingdoms.

> *Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand that is on the seashore in abundance; they were eating and drinking and rejoicing. Now Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the River to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt.*
>
> (I Kings 4:20-21)

Righteous Lot?

Sometimes the character assessments we read in the Bible do not immediately correspond with the historical narratives in which we meet and learn about the characters themselves. For instance, it often strikes us as a bit discordant to find Samson and Jephthah in Hebrews 11. But perhaps the greatest disparity between the biblical biography of a person and a later statement about that person's moral fiber, is found in II Peter 2 with regard to Abram's nephew Lot.

> *…and if He rescued righteous Lot, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men (for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day by their lawless deeds)…*
>
> (II Peter 2:7-8)

Righteous Lot? I think that any reader of the Genesis account of Lot's choices may conclude with good reason that he was foolish, that he put material wealth before spiritual safety, and that he paid the price for walking by sight and not by faith. This would be to assess the history of Lot critically, without being too harsh on the man. But it would be a stretch for the reader of Genesis to attribute the quality of *righteousness* to Lot, as Peter does in this passage. The

traditional manner of handling this difficulty is to stand upon the 'verbal plenary inspiration' of the Scriptures, and to conclude that the Holy Spirit revealed to Peter a side of Lot that is not readily apparent when one reads the narrative of Lot's life. This is the approach taken by Alexander Nisbet in his commentary on II Peter,

> …the Apostle subjoins to the former instance the example of *Lot's* preservation, whom the Spirit of the Lord, that indicated this Scripture, commends by several expressions of great respect, for his deep resentment of and sympathy with the Lord's suffering honor and for these vile *Sodomites* amongst whom providence has cast his lot for a time.[77]

While it is true that Lot was in Sodom according to divine providence – for all things occur in accordance with divine providence – Nisbet fails to mention that Lot was in Sodom of his own volition, as well. It is a common tactic among Reformed commentators to erect the safe barricade of 'providence' when faced with a situation that is eminently difficult to interpret as being according to God's express purpose and will. Nisbet almost has us believing that Lot was sent to Sodom by a positive command, as Abram was sent to Canaan in the first place. But the reality of human decision-making – and its associated responsibility – along with the sovereign providence of God, is murkier than the clear water in which Alexander Nisbet beholds the righteousness of Lot.

A more modern way of looking at II Peter 2:7-8 (but not the very modern way of denying that Peter wrote this epistle or that it is anything more than a contradiction), is to see strains of apocryphal and rabbinic legend weaving into the biblical story, with the result that Lot's reputation is burnished with time. Thus we read of the righteousness of Lot in the apocryphal book of *Wisdom*, in Chapter 10, verse 6 and again in Chapter 19, verse 17. That Peter would quote the Apocrypha is not that unusual, seeing that Jude does the same thing and that Paul quotes a Greek philosopher. Just because a book was not granted the status

[77] Nisbet, Alexander *An Exposition of I & II Peter* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust; 1982); 253.

of canon does not mean that it is entirely and thoroughly false. The rational conclusion is that by the Second Temple era, Lot's reputation had attained a quality of 'righteousness' that modern readers sometimes find troubling.

But what is happening here is not a repudiation of the actual biblical narrative in Genesis. Rather it is the isolating and magnifying of a section of that narrative that otherwise is lost within the overall negativity of the life of Lot presented in Genesis. Tucked in with the overwhelmingly dark narrative concerning Lot's recession, we do in fact read that Lot stood against the perversity of the Sodomites, and apparently had a reputation among them for opposing their behavior, "*Furthermore, they said, 'This one came in as an alien, and already he is acting like a judge.'*"[78] Again, Lot's recommended solution of giving over his daughters to this lecherous band of Sodomites does not please our modern sensibilities, but he was acting according to all that was right in that time and place, for the two 'men' had come under Lot's roof (*cp.* Gen. 19:6-8).

In the end we are still faced with a difficulty of interpretation, and the best solution seems to be to understand Peter's words within Peter's context. The pericope of II Peter 2:1-11 is the ability of God to punish the wicked and to deliver the 'righteous.' It is a mistake to interpret the term 'righteousness' in its absolute sense at all times. David was 'righteous' before Saul – he was innocent of the slanders that had been leveled against him with respect to Saul and the throne. David is 'right' to protest his own 'righteousness' in that regard, and is not guilty of being prideful before the Lord. So in II Peter 2 we are reading of the - and the word is hateful to all 21st Century evangelicals – *relative* righteousness of Lot in comparison to the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah.

> Peter's statements about Lot's righteousness must be considered in their proper context. Similar to how Noah was an island of righteousness surrounded by a sea of iniquity (2 Peter 2:5), Lot was surrounded by extremely "wicked," "filthy," "lawless" citizens of Sodom (2 Peter 2:7-8). Although Lot was far from perfect, he

[78] Genesis 19:9

> was not a wicked, lawless unrighteous citizen of Sodom; he was righteous. Lot separated himself from the unlawfulness of the inhabitants of Sodom and was even tormented "day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds" (2 Peter 2:8).[79]

God's wrath was kindled against the Sodomites, and Lot *was not* a Sodomite. We have good reason to wonder why Lot went to Sodom in the first place, why he moved into the city itself, and why he resisted the angels' initiative to rescue him from there; but at least it can be said that Lot never imbibed the wickedness of his neighbors. What will happen to him later, while he was intoxicated, may be considered the continuing ramifications of the 'poor life choices' that led him to Sodom in the beginning. His is the story of a man who walked by sight and not by faith. The knowledge that he had of Jehovah, perhaps through the little he had learned while traveling with his uncle, caused his soul deep turmoil – *vexation* – while in the midst of Sodom. Yet he remained 'righteous' apparently in his adherence to his uncle's God and in contrast to their wickedness; righteous, but not right.

[79] Lyons, Eric *"Righteous Lot"?* Apologetics Press; 2008, http://www.apologeticspress.org/apcontent.aspx?category=6&article=2400

Week 6: Abram Contra Mundum

Text Reading: Genesis 14:1 - 24

"…the mysterious figure of Melchizedek
comes forth from a hidden background without any intervention,
as without it he again disappears –
a figure seen for a moment significant for ever."
(Franz Delitzsch)

Genesis 14 presents the modern student of the Bible with a unique challenge to his evangelical orthodoxy. Not so much his *theological* orthodoxy, as nothing is really said in this chapter that brings any of the central tenets of the faith into question. Indeed, it is in Chapter 14 that we are introduced to the enigmatic Melchizedek, who is later developed by the inspired text of Scripture into the most powerful type of the promised Messiah. No, the challenge posed by Genesis 14 has to do with *hermeneutical* orthodoxy – one's view on the doctrine of inspiration. The chapter is the only one within the patriarchal narratives that begins as it does, without mention of a patriarch and according to a formula that is far more likely to be found in an ancient chronicle than in the Bible. "This chapter contains some of the most difficult and most debated material in the patriarchal history, indeed, in the entire historical part of the Old Testament."[80] The chronological markers have absolutely no connection to what has gone before or what follows after – the kings mentioned in this passage have their only scene in the whole of the Genesis drama in this chapter.

The opening lines of the chapter are also full of information – especially *names* – which is itself a notable departure from the form of the patriarchal narratives before and after. "Almost every sentence is full of antiquarian information, and nowhere in the patriarchal stories do we find such a mass of historical and geographical detail."[81] Most significantly,, and the liberal critic's delight, none of the material has thus far been validated by archaeological

[80] Von Rad; 175.
[81] *Idem*.

research – what we read in Genesis 14, we read only in Genesis 14. Von Rad is so convinced that Genesis 14 is a "world in itself," that he refuses to attach it to any of the documentary sources that otherwise fill his commentary on the Book of Genesis. With the bravado typical of the higher critic, he boldly declares that there can be no attachment between Genesis 14 and the material that goes before or comes after.

> No wonder that this chapter cannot be connected with one of the Hexateuchal sources! It is substantially, generically, and literarily completely isolated and was apparently first introduced into its present context by a redactor (though this, of course, gives no indication of the age of the material). The exposition, therefore, is methodically directed to this chapter alone. Any hasty combination with the historical view or chronology of the other Hexateuchal sources can only cause great confusion.[82]

As if the Documentary Hypothesis has not already caused enough 'great confusion.' Speiser comments in the same vein, "Genesis xiv stands alone among all the accounts in the Pentateuch, if not indeed in the Bible as a whole. The setting is international, the approach impersonal, and the narration notable for its unusual style and vocabulary…For all these reasons the chapter has to be ascribed to an isolated source, here marked *X*."[83] This attitude toward Genesis 14 is typical of the liberal view with regard to the inspiration of the Bible, a very loose view indeed, and especially in comparison to the fundamentalist view of 'plenary, verbal inspiration.' The passage is undeniably of a different sort than that which surrounds it; this cannot be reasonably denied by any biblical scholar. The material is ancient and unconfirmed – a favorite combination for the liberal scholar to declare as 'legendary' and/or 'mythological.' But the student's attitude toward the narrative of the wars of the kings, and of Abram's relation to these international events, is more than just academic. It would be that, and perhaps no more, if not for the introduction of Melchizedek in the midst of the

[82] *Idem*.
[83] Speiser; 105.

narrative, and the massively significant act of Abram paying a tithe to the priest-king of Salem. The liberal legend mongering once again runs into the insuperable problem of 'where to draw the line.' If the kings, and their wars, constitutes nothing more than legend and myth, then what substance can be attributed to the interaction between the patriarch and Melchizedek? The differentiation becomes entirely arbitrary, and even a cursory review of where various scholars draw the line between the legend and the 'history' (very few are willing to credit Melchizedek with being an actual, historical personage), shows how arbitrary the whole procedure really is.

The conservative evangelical is called upon to give an account as to the historical validity of the passage. In doing so he is faced with the reality that the names and places and events recorded here are as yet almost entirely unknown to archaeological science – they are shrouded in antiquity and, due to the relative obscurity of their peoples during this time, will probably remain so forever. These were not the mighty empires of Egypt, Sumer, Assyria, or Babylon; these were minor kings of petty states, all of which would either disappear from the world stage altogether, or be swallowed up the grand empires of later years. There are some similarities between the names listed in Genesis 14 and others found in the ancient kings lists of Assyria and Medo-Persia, but no indisputable connection can be made between these sources and the biblical text. John Bright, in his *A History of Israel*, points out that the contents of the narrative of the kings is quite reasonable from the standpoint of the ethnicities of the kings' names and of the places mentioned – four of the kings have names that fit the territories from whence they came, while the other five kings' names are constructed etymologically of components common in ancient Canaan. In other words, and this is the hermeneutical point of importance to conservative students, *just because the names and events have not been validated by archaeological research, this does not mean the content of the narrative is unhistorical*. Bright alludes to the apparent veracity of the text while at the same time admitting that the content

cannot be verified historically. "But the incident, authentic though it seems, cannot at present be clarified in terms of known events on the Middle Bronze Age."[84]

This is the approach that the conservative biblical student must take: accept the text at face value, regardless of whether or not the names and events have been discovered in the archaeological digs of the Middle East. It must be admitted by even the most ardent archaeologist, that only a very small fraction of what transpired in the ancient world has ever – or will ever – been discovered by the archaeologist's spade. The narrative of Genesis 14 is, if anything, even more historical in its prose than the surrounding patriarchal stories. Indeed, the first half of the chapter reads as if it were extracted whole from some royal or priestly chronicle, taken down either at the time of, or shortly after, the events recorded. Of these types of chronicles archaeology has found myriads, and they have opened up the world of the Ancient Near East to the modern eye. The very opening line of Chapter 14, "*And it came about in the days of Amraphel king of Shinar…*" is vintage chronicle writing, and presents absolutely no *a priori* justification for being treated as legend. A refreshing summary of the events reported in Genesis 14 is found in Emmanuel Anati's *Palestine Before the Hebrews*,

> One of the most remarkable documents in the Book of Genesis is Chapter 14, which describes in a very vivid way some of the political activities going on at the time. The kings of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Zoar, five settlements in the Negev and the Araba Valley, appear to have been vassals of 'Chedorlaomer, king of Elam,' and after a while they decided to rebel. Chedorlaomer, probably the distorted name of a southern Mesopotamian figure, came with his allied kings and his army, and first attacked the nomadic and semi-nomadic people of the region. We find among these people Horites, Amorites, Amalekites, Rephaites, Zuzites, and Emites…After having chased away these tribes, the Elamite king directed his armies against the confederacy of the five kings, met them in the valley of Sodom, and defeated them.[85]

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[84] Bright, John *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press; 1981), 84.
[85] Anati; 384-85.

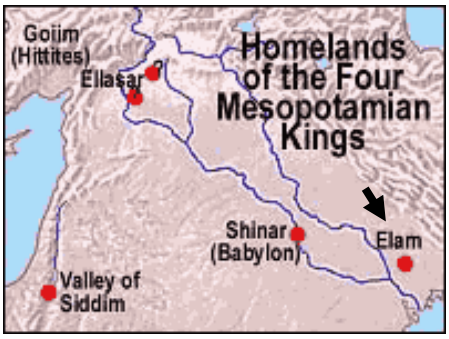
A straightforward reading of a straightforward text. One wonders why this is so difficult for the liberal scholar.

Yet there is still a challenge to the hermeneutical orthodoxy of the evangelical: *How did Moses get this knowledge of these events?* The modern traditional view of inspiration answers that the information was given to him infallibly and directly by the Holy Spirit. But if this were the case, one would reasonably expect the chapter to begin with some mention of where Abram was living and what he was doing, before moving to the political upheaval of the surrounding nations. This is the pattern of every transition in the patriarchal narrative – to say something touching directly upon the patriarch himself. In Genesis 14 Abram does not enter the picture until verse 13, after all of the turmoil had passed.

The conservative student need not diminish his view of the 'God breathed' nature of Scripture if he admits that the writers thereof made use of historical material ready to hand. If the text reads like it came from an already published chronicle, then there is every reason to conclude that it did. Moses was raised in the royal court of Egypt, where he would have had access to many historical records that have since been lost. Perhaps in addition to the jewelry and precious metals that the Israelites took on their way out of Egypt, Moses added some of these 'books'! To some people books are more valuable than gold and silver, anyway. We know from other passages in the Bible – especially Luke's introductory comments to his gospel and the Book of Acts – that the writers made use of materials that were not directly inspired. Perhaps their selection of these non-inspired texts somehow 'inspires' them retroactively, but it seems that such a conclusion is unnecessary. It is enough that they are historical, and accurately set the stage for the more important story that flows along and through these ancient events – the interaction of Abram with the kings of the world, and with one king in particular: Melchizedek.

And it came about in the days of Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer king of Elam, and Tidal king of Goiim, that they made war with Bera king of Sodom, and with Birsha king of Gomorrah, Shinab king of Admah, and Shemeber king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar). **(14:1-2)**

The major objection that scholars take to the narrative of world events recorded here, beside the fact that the names of the kings are not attested in any archaeological discovery to date, is that Chedorlaomer – who is soon singled out as the leader of the invading armies – is the king of Elam. The territory of Elam, at least as it has come to be known through studies of the Ancient Near East, is very far away from the land in which these events take place – to the east of Babylon, in what would one-day become the Medo-Persian Empire. It is considered impossible that a king so far removed from the territory of the Negev would have any interest in the events taking place there. But this is merely to assert that there could never be an empire in the world, until there was one. Certainly the reach of the ancient Sumerians was remarkable when one considers the primitive nature of their weapons and transportation – but these only had to be stronger and faster than those of the peoples subjugated. Lacking any archaeological data to the contrary, we have no reason to doubt that the Elamites of the early Second Millennium (*c.* 1900 BC) controlled a vast area through intermediaries, just as later empires were to do. It was not until the Roman Empire that provinces and territories were directly controlled by Roman legions, though even with Rome the composition of these legions was very ethnically diverse.



The territories of the five kings was astride both the Way of the Sea and the King's Highway – the former passing between Syria and Egypt along the Mediterranean coast, the latter running along the western cusp of the Arabian Desert. These two passageways were the highways of the caravans and the armies of the ancient world, and it is far from unreasonable that the more ancient

and established kingdoms of the Euphrates/Tigris river basins would exercise suzerainty over smaller petty kingdoms in such lands as Canaan. Certainly the kings who rode with Chedorlaomer were themselves potentates of significant regions – Amraphel of Shinar, which was to become the infamous Babylon, and Tidal, king of the *nations*, or of the West, most likely a forerunner of the great Hittite Empire of the 17th Century BC.

The narrative is exceedingly straightforward and 'historical,' and by all literary justice should be read in that manner. Four more powerful kings apparently shared the overlordship of the petty vassals of Canaan. These vassal states were probably nothing more than annual contributors to the royal coffers of their liege lords' treasuries, though they may have also been required to furnish men for the armies of their sovereign, as it was centuries later in Feudal Europe. This the vassal kings did peacefully for twelve years, but in the thirteenth year they rebelled. Further indication of the distance between the stronger kings and the rebellious confederacy is found in the fact that it was not until the *fourteenth* year that Chedorlaomer finally brought his armies into the land. According to the sense of the narrative, by that time the rebellion had spread beyond the lands of the five kings to the south. Thus far the story is eminently reasonable as a piece of actual history, and contains nothing mythical or legendary. E. A. Speiser, a representative of the liberal Wellhausen school, accords high marks for the historical authenticity of the contents of the story,

> The geographic detail that marks the route of the invaders, and the casual listing of the Cities of the Plan, lend further support to the essential credibility of the narrative. Who the foreign invaders were remains uncertain. It is highly improbable, however, that they were major political figures.[86]

But why is this narrative here, in the midst of the Abrahamic narrative? The simple answer is that, *it happened*, and Abram was involved. But one must

[86] Speiser; 108.

realize that *many* things happened in which Abram was somehow involved, things that were not recorded for our instruction. The sudden interposition of the 'Wars of the Kings' narrative here in Genesis 14 demands the hermeneutical question; *Why?* Most conservative scholars would disagree with E. A. Speiser, who somehow concludes that this whole passage is little more than the attempt of a later Jewish author to inject some moxie into the patriarch Abraham. Speiser writes, "It is this exploit by Abraham, in the otherwise unfamiliar role of a warrior, that evidently led to the inclusion of the chapter with the regular patriarchal material in Genesis."[87] Speiser misses the point entirely, but subordinating the rescue by Abram of his nephew Lot to the clearly more important aspect of Abram's encounter with the kings of Salem and of Sodom, consequent to that victorious battle. This is not a lame attempt to impose martial glory on the ancient patriarch by inserting him into a remote and unrelated ancient battle – a sort of photo-shopped cropping of Abraham into a picture of warring kings. Rather it is a narrative of historical events in the life of the patriarch that vividly display the relationship of the believer to the world surrounding him. John Sailhamer has a more reasonable and biblically sound analysis of the reason for this account being where we find it within the Abrahamic narratives,

> In putting these two narratives (i.e., the War of the Kings and the encounter with Melchizedek) in this way the author has allowed an event of international importance to sweep past Abraham's tent in Hebron and thus to involve Abraham in an event that will show on an enormous scale the implications of Abraham's faith – yet without losing its simple and everyday character.[88]

[87] Speiser; 106.
[88] Sailhamer; 145.

All these came as allies to the valley of Siddim (that is, the Salt Sea). Twelve years they had served Chedorlaomer, but the thirteenth year they rebelled. In the fourteenth year Chedorlaomer and the kings that were with him, came and defeated the Rephaim in Ashteroth-karnaim and the Zuzim in Ham and the Emim in Shaveh-kiriathaim, and the Horites in their Mount Seir, as far as El-paran, which is by the wilderness. Then they turned back and came to En-mishpat (that is, Kadesh), and conquered all the country of the Amalekites, and also the Amorites, who lived in Hazazon-tamar. And the king of Sodom and the king of Gomorrah and the king of Admah and the king of Zeboiim and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar) came out; and they arrayed for battle against them in the valley of Siddim, against Chedorlaomer king of Elam and Tidal king of Goiim and Amraphel king of Shinar and Arioch king of Ellasar—four kings against five. Now the valley of Siddim was full of tar pits; and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, and they fell into them. But those who survived fled to the hill country. **(14:3-10)**

Wellhausen's Documentary Hypothesis is overworked, and has been abandoned by many modern scholars. The conservative reaction to Wellhausen, however, contains its own errors. On the one hand, it is unreasonable to assign every single differentiation in prose (like the use of *Elohim* instead of *Jahveh* for 'God') to a unique author, as Wellhausen and his disciples have done. On the other hand, it is equally unreasoning to assume that all of the information contained in the Pentateuch came to Moses fresh from divine inspiration, *sans* the use of any source documents for his history. The text of the War of the Kings is undeniably different than the surrounding patriarchal narratives, indicating that either (1), it was added by a different author – the Wellhausen theory, or (2), it was lifted from another source material and inserted here by the author. Strict advocates of the theory of inspiration known as 'plenary verbal,' chafe at both options.[89] But reasonably, the second option is to be preferred to the first, and in no way impinges upon the inerrancy of Scripture – though it does seem to diminish the 'plenary verbal' view.

Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918)

[89] *Plenary Verbal Inspiration* theory holds that each and every word of the Bible (in the original documents, or 'autographs') is divinely inspired. This view is often coordinated with the *amanuensis* or 'dictation' view of inspiration.

The geographical and political details contained in these verses – the unique ethnicities of the names listed, the thorough analysis of the movement of the invading armies, etc. – all point to the work of a chronicler, of which many, many example exist in the Bible and in the ancient writings thus far discovered by archaeologists. In short, it is apparent that Moses borrowed the record of these events from the annals of a royal reporter – perhaps from the Egyptian court in which he was raised, perhaps from a source originating in Babylonia; the source itself has never been found, and cannot be determined by anything other than conjecture.

The picture painted by these verses is one quite typical of the world of Abram's day, and for many centuries thereafter. Stronger chieftains of more populous and prosperous regions held weaker tribal lords as feudal vassals in much the same manner as found in medieval Europe. There was a hierarchy of political power then as there has always been in the world, and there was chronic rebellion as weaker 'kings' would attempt to throw off the yoke of their stronger liege lords – sometimes successfully, often not. That the suzerain Chedorlaomer lived far away from the region of trouble is evidenced by the lateness of his arrival in Canaan after the start of the rebellion. By that time it appears the rebellion had spread, and Chedorlaomer *et. al.*, had to suppress and subjugate other recalcitrant vassals in the north of Canaan before turning his their attention to the confederacy of five kings in and around Sodom.

We have no historical justification for assuming that either the rebellious armies of the five kings, or the invading forces under Chedorlaomer, were a numerous horde – that spectre of hundreds of thousands or even millions of armed soldiers is a phenomenon of after years, but not of the ancient world. One 19th Century commentary notes that even in that relatively modern time, Arab armies rarely numbered even in the thousands, and notes that "…a chief rarely musters above three hundred men in the greatest of their warlike expeditions; and supposing that Chedorlaomer and his allies brought each of them such a

contingent, the whole amount would be 1,200 men – a very inconsiderable force according to modern notions of an army."[90] It is well attested that the success of armies in the ancient world (as in the modern) more often hinged upon technology and tactics, than on numbers. The modern reader of the Genesis narrative of war must be careful not to read the massive armed movements of the 20th Century *AD* back into the text of the 20th Century ***BC*.**

Then they took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their food supply, and departed. They also took Lot, Abram's nephew, and his possessions and departed, for he was living in Sodom. **(14:11-12)**

Undoubtedly Abram knew of the events taking place around his tents and flocks in Hebron; news of current events was no less a stable of human social conversation then as it is now. Thus far, however, Abram was not moved to intervene – he had no dog in this fight and displays an isolationist and non-interventionist policy toward 'foreign affairs.' Much as the United States did during the build-up to and initial years of both 20th Century world wars, Abram apparently saw no necessity of involvement in the political affairs of the world around him. But then his nephew fell victim to the turmoil, and was carried off as spoil by the invading armies of Chedorlaomer and his allies. Even at this point, on account of the voluntary separation of Lot from his uncle, Abram would have been within his rights to stay uninvolved.[91]

Lot, as we have seen in the last session, continues to suffer the ill effects of his foolish life choices – choosing not only to live nearby Sodom, but rather to move into the city itself, makes Lot and his family and his possession fair game in the political upheavals and contests of the worldly kings. Although the more

[90] Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown; 139.
[91] We will see in the next chapter that Abram did not consider Lot to be his legitimate heir, but rather a servant born in his house would be his heir. Apparently the breach between uncle and nephew was legally comprehensive.

direct meaning of the proverb has to do with sexual promiscuity, it nonetheless applies to Lot: *"Can a man take fire in his bosom and his clothes not be burned?"*[92]

Then a fugitive came and told Abram the Hebrew. Now he was living by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and brother of Aner, and these were allies with Abram. When Abram heard that his relative had been taken captive, he led out his trained men, born in his house, three hundred and eighteen, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. He divided his forces against them by night, he and his servants, and defeated them, and pursued them as far as Hobah, which is north of Damascus. He brought back all the goods, and also brought back his relative Lot with his possessions, and also the women, and the people. **(14:13-16)**

This passage, of course, is considered the legendary element of the whole story by the liberal critical school that originated in Germany in the 19th Century. The question is reasonable: How could Abram, nothing more than a prosperous herdsman, accomplish such feats of martial glory against a regional power like the king of Elam and his allies? Such skepticism, however, is founded on assumptions that may be very inaccurate. For instance, it assumes that Chedorlaomer's army was itself of massive proportions, an assumption that we have already noted would be quite unusual for the time and place of the early 20th Century BC. Another assumption is that Abram acted alone, with his 318 men, when the text clearly indicates that he also had allies – Mamre and his brothers - who, presumably, brought with them their own small armies. It is quite reasonable to conclude that, when the forces were divided prior to the attack, that each of the four leaders took their own contingent of fighting men – rather than Abram dividing up his men – and attacked the Elamite army from various sides. Werner Keller comments succinctly, "Only those who do not know the tactics of the Bedouins will consider this an unlikely story."[93]

Another possibly faulty assumption is that Abram and his allies attached the main body of the alliance of the four kings, rather than the baggage and plunder train that would have lagged behind the main body of the army. Abram

[92] Proverbs 6:27
[93] Keller; 73.

was not trying to pick a fight with Chedorlaomer; he was attempting to rescue his nephew. It has always been the case that armies on the move spread out across the land like a sinuous snake – with the main army in front and the baggage, booty, and 'hangers on' trailing far behind. The commanding general would assign several divisions as rear-guard elements of his force, but it is not unusual in the military annals of the empires for their to be dozens, and even scores, of miles between the vanguard and the rearguard. Abram attacked the rearguard, and his victory need not be interpreted as over the entirety of Chedorlaomer's forces.

Another specious assumption is that the greater number always prevails in battle. Nothing need be said on this, as it is patently untrue to history. The victorious forces of Chedorlaomer's alliance may very well have been satiated with the spoils of war, considering themselves invincible on the basis of their string of victories, and ripe for a 'reality check' in the form of this offended group of four Bedouin herdsman and their loyal retainer armies. But by far the most unstable assumption made by the doubters, is that God does not intervene in the course of human conflict, bringing about military results that are – to the human mind – nothing less than miraculous. As will be seen in the next section of the chapter, Abram's victory was due to the intervention of God, who is not bound by the military logic of troops and tactics. Shakespeare – not known to be an evangelical – recognized at least in the words he gives to Henry V, that 'the battle belongs to the Lord.' After the remarkable victory of Agincourt – where the English were outnumbered by an unbelievably large ratio – Shakespeare provides this exchange between King Henry and Captain Fluellen,

King Henry: Come, go we in procession to the village;
And be it death proclaimed through our host
To boast of this, or take that praise from God
Which is His only.

Captain Fluellen: Is it not lawful, and please your Majesty, to tell how many is killed?

King Henry: Yes, Captain; but with this acknowledgment;
That God fought for us.[94]

As hard as it is for modern liberal biblical scholars to accept, God fought for Abram.

Then after his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he was a priest of God Most High. He blessed him and said,

"Blessed be Abram of God Most High,
Possessor of heaven and earth;
And blessed be God Most High,
Who has delivered your enemies into your hand." **(14:17-20a)**

All events lead to this stage of the drama – the interview between Melchizedek and Abram. Two kings come out to meet Abram, to celebrate the patriarch's signal victory over the invading alliance. But the two kings represent two vastly different kingdoms, and Abram's response to each is perhaps the crux of the whole narrative. The king of Sodom is mentioned first, then the king of Salem. The narrative then treats of the second before returning to the first, in order to show Abram's developing understanding of the walk of faith and his continuing disdain for the temptations of this world.

It is tempting to launch into a thorough exposition of the person and significance of Melchizedek, the king of Salem, and this is what many commentaries do – ranging from Genesis 14 to Psalm 110 to Hebrews 7 and back again. As beneficial as such a study undoubtedly is – particularly in the context of Hebrews 7, where the author most fully develops the Christological significance of Melchizedek – it tends to inhibit the student's understanding of the Genesis text, and of the development of faith within the patriarch Abram. There is no real mystery concerning Melchizedek in Genesis 14; he is another

[94] Shakespeare *Henry V* Act 4; Scene 8.

king in the midst of numerous already mentioned. Clearly, however, he stands in a different position than the others, a difference that Abram both recognizes and honors.

Melchizedek was a priest of "*God Most High.*" This is the introduction of the divine name *El Elyon*, which name Abram himself will ascribe to his God in the same narrative, only a few verses on. Melchizedek's position as a priest to the "*Possessor of heaven and earth,*" whom we all immediately recognize as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has generated a great deal of speculation in both Jewish and Christian literature as to the identity of this man. The theories run the gamut from a *Christophany* – a pre-incarnate appearance of the Second Person of the Godhead – to *Shem*, the blessed son of Noah who was, apparently, still alive when these events took place. All that is known of Melchizedek from the text, however, is that he has somehow remained true to the religion of the Creator God. "Melchizedek was not an idolater, nor a Pantheist addicted to nature worship in any form, but a believer in a living personal God, - a Monotheist in an age when mankind were [*sic*] becoming rapidly polytheistic."[95]

The record of the meeting between Melchizedek and Abram clearly indicates Abram's self-subordination to Melchizedek by the fact that the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils to the king of Salem (v. 20b). Nothing is made of this in the text, though much is interpreted from it by the psalmist and by the author of Hebrews. The latter's conclusion that "*the lesser was blessed by the greater*" (Heb. 7:7) is the universal understanding of man's position within religion. "By this priest-king, who has no authority to point to from descent and law, the ancestor of Israel, of Levi and of Aaron, the father of the nation of the promise, of the priesthood and of the Law, allows himself to be blessed."[96] Thus, while we cannot know just who Melchizedek was, we can know that there existed before Abram a continuation of the true worship – rudimentary, perhaps,

[95] Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown; 142.
[96] Delitzsch; 411.

and far beneath the greater revelation that was to come in and through Abraham, but true nonetheless.

> Melchizedek is like the setting sun of the primitive revelation made to men before their separation into nations, the last rays of which shine upon the patriarch, from whom the true light of the world is in process of coming.[97]

Alfred Edersheim concurs, "In fact, we stand here at the threshold of two dispensations. The covenant with Noah had, so to speak, run its course, or rather was merging into that with Abram…Melchizedek was probably the last representative of the race of *Shem* in the land of Canaan…he was the last representative of the *faith* of Shem, in the midst of idolatry."[98]

The king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give the people to me and take the goods for yourself." Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have sworn to the LORD God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth, that I will not take a thread or a sandal thong or anything that is yours, for fear you would say, 'I have made Abram rich.' I will take nothing except what the young men have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me, Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre; let them take their share. **(14:21-24)**

Abram's response to the king of Sodom is quite different to the respect and honor he gave to the king of Salem. Indeed, it is downright disrespectful, indicating that a 'king' in the ancient Near East was little more than a *sheik* or *emir* today, and that, due to his wealth, Abram was considered the equal of the petty 'kings' who had conspired against Chedorlaomer. This king of Sodom was most likely the same who led the confederacy of the five kings, and the mention of the tar pits earlier in the chapter (v. 10) was meant to indicate the *armies* of the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fell into the tar pits, and not the kings themselves. This man, the king of Sodom, was most likely the epitome of the wickedness of his city and its people, of which Abram was well aware and with which he would have nothing to do.

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[97] *Ibid.*; 412.
[98] Edersheim, *Bible History*; 61.

Thus the narrative closes in the form of a *Tale of Two Cities* – Salem and Sodom. This is the universal narrative of the City of God versus the City of Man, as so eloquently (and so wordily) exposited by Augustine in his famous *Civitate Dei.* This is the abiding contrast and conflict between the Kingdom of God and that of the devil, with Melchizedek representing the former and the king of Sodom, the latter. The theme runs through Scripture, and through human history.

Abram's acknowledgment of and honor to the king of Salem, and his stinging rebuke of the king of Sodom, are the typical (as is *typology*) attitude of the man of faith during his sojourn in this world. The patriarch is not eschewing worldly wealth – he was himself a very wealthy man. Rather he is refusing to become "*unequally yoked*" with the king of Sodom, who represents all that which is not of God, but of Man. The moral character of the king of Sodom must lie behind Abram's refusal to take what was justifiably his on account of his military victory, contrasted by the military defeat of the king of Sodom. Abram refuses to take so much as a shoestring from the king of Sodom, whereas he was quite willing to grow rich off the largess of Pharaoh just a short while earlier. We cannot conclude, therefore, that this passage teaches the abandonment of any and all commercial interaction with the world, but rather that while in the world – and living *in* the world – the believer must remain *separate* from the world in a manner that is visibly manifest to those around him. How this plays out in each believer's life – who are the 'kings of Sodom' today – is a matter for each man's conscience before the Lord.

Week 7: Covenantal Monergism

Text Reading: Genesis 15:1 - 21

"The faith of our father Abraham
is constantly said to be the same with ours;
but if his had not respect to Christ,
it is essentially different from ours."
(Charles Simeon)

We have traveled with Abram from Ur of the Chaldees to Haran in Syria, from Haran to Canaan and down into Egypt, back to Canaan and finally, on a military campaign. Thus far Abram has been directed by God on several occasions, though he has not yet spoken to God (at least inasmuch as the recorded narrative informs us). Significantly, it is not until the events of this current chapter – Chapter 15 – that we read explicitly of God enacting a *covenant* with Abram: *"On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram…"* (15:18). Chapter 15 is a watershed narrative in the life of Abram; a transition from Abram the wandering Bedouin to Abram the covenant friend of God. It is in this chapter that we read of Abram's faith being imputed to him as righteousness (15:6), and in this chapter that we witness the awesome 'cutting of the covenant' in the dream vision (15:8-18). This chapter also records the first words spoken by Abram to God, expressing finally some comprehension of the overall purpose of God's call, though in terms of hesitance and doubt perhaps.

The concept of the covenant has become extremely important within Reformed theology, which is also considered synonymous with 'Covenant Theology,' though that can be reasonably debated. Vos explain the logic, "If the work of salvation has a covenantal form at its roots, then the rest of its unfolding is bound to correspond to it and proceed in a covenantal way."[99] Covenant Theology represents one popular framework of biblical interpretation within Western evangelicalism; Dispensationalism represents the other. There are

[99] Vos, Geerhardus *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing; 2001); 252.

indeed distinct covenants mentioned in Scripture, as there are undoubtedly dispensations ('economies') through which progressive revelation unfolds. But it is also possible that both of these concepts have been overworked, and misunderstood, as terms denoting the basic framework of divine revelation. Dispensations, for instance, are not discontinuous epochs of a manifold purpose of God, but rather stages along the path of progressive revelation of one eternal purpose. Covenants, for their part, are by no means created equal, with the Davidic Covenant subordinate to the Mosaic, and the Mosaic subordinate to the Abrahamic…and all subordinate to the New Covenant in Jesus Christ.

One of the hermeneutical problems with erecting an interpretive framework for biblical study – whether Covenantalism or Dispensationalism - is that this framework becomes a rigid structure that is subsequently never questioned – like the framework of a house. But if the framework is faulty, the whole consequent structure will be substandard. But the analogy of construction continues to hold, as the framework, once built, is rarely ever changed and continues to control whatever work is done afterward. This has been the case with Covenantal Theology, to the point that one is not 'truly Reformed' unless there is total agreement with the theological framework, along with its historical ramifications and corollaries. As we are here encountering the first stone in the foundation of theological covenantalism, it is undoubtedly the best place to give at least a cursory evaluation of whole system. Both Reformed Covenantalism and Arminian Dispensationalism are branches of the theological study of Soteriology, each will find their more thorough analysis under the systematic study of *Christ and Salvation*.

Priority of place with regard to any discussion of the covenant 'cut' in Genesis 15, is to reiterate the correct Reformed view that the Abrahamic Covenant is *monergistic*. In a very real sense, what we read of in Genesis 15 is not a 'covenant' at all, for it is by no means a cooperative or mutual event between two roughly equal parties. This is one of the starkest contrasts between

Reformed and Arminian theological systems, and the advocate of a cooperative or synergistic soteriology must overcome the narrative of Genesis 15 for his system to remain biblical. The vision of the smoking oven and the flaming torch is the most powerful testimony to the biblical truth: Salvation is of the Lord.

But the inauguration of the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis 15 must also be recognized in its formative state, with the fundamental components presented by the Holy Spirit. In other words, the study of covenants and dispensations must be careful to establish the core principles, and also to establish elements that are transient and not essential. For instance, it is crucial to note that the ritual of circumcision *is not* a part of the covenant inauguration in Genesis 15, but that faith *is*. Genesis 15:6 is the prelude, though not the cause, of the covenant vision beginning in verse 8. This is to teach that while *faith* is of the essence of the Abrahamic Covenant – which is indeed the Covenant of Grace – *circumcision* is not. The realization of this truth allowed the Apostle Paul to preach the Gospel freely to the Gentiles, and to battle vigorously against those who failed to make this important distinction. Paul explains this critical truth to the Romans,

> *Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, 'Faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness.' How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.* (Romans 4:9-12)

This facet of the Abrahamic Covenant becomes crucial not only at the time the Gospel was being preached to the Gentiles, but also with regard to the Church's own ritual practice of infant baptism. This practice has been defended by Reformed theologians as integral to the covenant blessings intended to be enjoyed by the children of believers, as the rite of circumcision was intended for all sons born into the covenant family of Abraham (including, as we shall see in a

later lesson, the sons of slaves and servants). Geerhardus Vos, a Presbyterian minister and seminary professor, remarks with admirable candor that "In their defense of infant baptism they reached for the Old Testament and applied the federal understanding of the sacraments to the new dispensation."[100] While this is not the context or format to enter into a polemical debate concerning the relationship of New Testament baptism to Old Testament circumcision, it does bear noting that both the Abrahamic narrative and the writings of Paul highlight the fact that circumcision was not of the essence of the covenant, but occurred much later.

It is further to be observed that *the Law* was not of the essence of the institution of the Abrahamic Covenant, coming even later in redemptive history than the institution of circumcision as a covenant seal. The covenant establishment during the patriarchal era was without legal or liturgical accompaniment, in order to highlight the essential nature of *faith* to the core of the covenant relationship. Vos again writes, "Little was done to make the life of the people of God, even in an external religious sense, different from that of their environment. No ceremonial system on a large scale was set up to stress a distinction. Circumcision was the only rite instituted, and since this was also practiced by the surrounding tribes, even it did not really differentiate."[101] Again, the apostle makes a point in his epistle to the Galatians regarding the non-essential characteristic of the Law to the Abrahamic Covenant.

> *Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as referring to many, but rather to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ. What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise.* (Galatians 3:16-18)

[100] Vos, *Redemptive History*; 236.
[101] Vos, *Biblical Theology*; 78.

A caveat is in order at this point. All of this is not to say that circumcision and the Law were of insignificant account to the unfolding of God's redemptive plan. These features of the Abrahamic Covenant are noted in connection with Genesis 15 – the *inauguration of the covenant* – to highlight the fact that the only facet mentioned at that time is that of *faith*. Thus *faith* is the one essential characteristic of the Abrahamic Covenant; faith is the *sine qua non* of membership in the Abrahamic Covenant. All of this is crucial for our understanding that the Abrahamic Covenant was not so much a covenant – at least not in the typical connotation of that word and concept – as it was a *promise*. This is perhaps the most important characteristic of the gracious covenant established *by God alone* with the patriarch Abraham, for the fact that this covenant was *monergistic* – an independent, gracious *promise* on the part of God – undergirds its application to sinners *apart from works*.

Genesis 15 stands out as one of the most important narratives in the Bible. Perhaps Paul had the event recorded here in mind when he wrote that *"The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham…"*[102] Genesis 15 is not the first we hear of the Gospel in the Old Testament, for the promise of the Seed of Woman remains the *protoevangelium*, but here is where the Gospel begins to take that shape which it will retain until the fulfillment of the 'Seed' promise in the Advent of our Lord Jesus Christ. The importance of this chapter, therefore, makes it even more critical that the reader distinguish the essence from the accidents of the Abrahamic Covenant, and recognize that this gracious act of God on behalf of Abraham (and his physical and spiritual descendants) was not a two-way transaction. Franz Delitzsch does not deny the biblical text when he writes, "There is no proper entering into a covenant; for God grants and confirms a promise to Abram, on which account it is He only who passes between the

[102] Galatians 3:8

portions of the sacrifice. Hence it is not a covenant in the sense of a *pactia* (pact), but of a *sponsia* (sponsorship)."

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying,
"Do not fear, Abram,
I am a shield to you;
Your reward shall be very great." **(15:1)**

This verse is commonly 'read forward,' to borrow from a current colloquialism. We anticipate another iteration of the covenant terminology in the dialogue between God and Abram. But in doing so we miss an obvious question that ought to be asked of the text: What was Abram afraid of? It is safe to assume that the comforting words from the Lord, *"Do not fear,"* flow from the divine knowledge of the heart of Abram. In other words, God *knew* that Abram was afraid, and spoke to him in order to allay such fears. So what was it that Abram feared?

The terms of the divine address would lead us to conclude that Abram was unsettled by the events that had just transpired (Genesis 14). *"I am a shield to you,"* and *"your reward will be great,"* both allude to the battles that had recently been fought, the political turmoil that Abram had reluctantly been embroiled in (due to the folly of his nephew, Lot), and the fact that Abram refused to profit by the victory he won over the invading kings. This is exactly how some commentators psychoanalyze the patriarch. Delitzsch writes that "Abram is to have no fear in the midst of the strange and hostile surrounding, for Jahveh is his shield."[103] C. F Keil follows the same interpretive path as he recounts the mundane struggles that Abram has faced thus far: the deception of Pharaoh with regard to Sarai, the conflict with Lot over the land, and the wars of the kings and rescue of Abram's nephew. Keil concludes, "In these circumstances, anxiety about the future might naturally arise in his mind."[104] In spite of the temporal

[103] Delitzsch, Franz *New Commentary on Genesis: Volume 2* (Minneapolis, MN: Klock & Klock Publishers; 1978); 3.
[104] Keil & Delitzsch; 211.

problems that Abram has faced, however, it becomes apparent by his response to the Lord that these are not the source of his fears.

Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." **(15:2-3)**

Abram expresses no concern whatsoever regarding his temporal surroundings, nor any danger that might come from that front. No, the first words recorded from Abram to God have to do with the fact that, after so many years since his departure from Ur, he remains childless, without an heir. Leon Kass has the audacity to claim that "God partially misses the mark," when the divine word comes to Abram, promising temporal protection and reward.[105] But God, knowing exactly what is about to transpire, manifests a common form of communication with those whom He has honored to be His covenant representatives in the unfolding plan of redemption. By what He says, alluding as He seems to do to the mundane issues of safety and wealth, He draws out of Abram exactly the concern that He wishes to be on the patriarch's heart and mind: *the promise of a seed*. H. C. Leupold is more in tune with the dialogue than is Kass,

> Now, it cannot be denied that Abram was human enough to be visited by a measure of trepidation as the thought of another punitive expedition from the East. But the rest of the chapter shows beyond the possibility of doubt that such a fear is by no means under consideration, but the fear of remaining childless is what Abram and the Lord alone refer to.[106]

It cannot be determined with any dogmatic certainty exactly what Abram considered when he thought of his own childlessness. On the one hand, it has long been a matter of the deepest concern for a man to have an heir, and preferably one from his own loins. This is especially true in the ancient world, as

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[105] Kass; 305.
[106] Leupold, H. C. *Exposition of Genesis: Volume 1* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House; 1942); 472.

is illustrated by the later narrative of Hannah, who was unable to provide her husband Elkanah with a son (*cp.* I Sam. 1). This possible concern for Abram would be understandable within his culture, and would also be corroborated by the subsequent narrative of his 'going in' to Hagar, Sarai's maidservant, in order to have a child by her.

While such a concern is both plausible and reasonable, it probably does not fit the biblical flow of redemptive history. We cannot know just how much Abram understood of the revelation that had been given up to his day, but we must recognize the persistent thread of the 'Seed of Woman' and the spirit of expectation that is found in Eve when her son Cain (and later, Seth) is born, and in Lamech at the birth of Noah. This same sense of redemptive history and prophecy is probably involved in King Hezekiah's sadness when told that he would soon die. We cheapen the biblical record, and turn it into a mere chronology of events, if we fail to see the thread of that seminal promise woven through the narratives that follow. Perhaps Abram did not possess a full understanding of this promise at this stage, but we have our Lord's own words to convince us that the patriarch came to that understanding at some point, and probably had at least a vague sense of it in Genesis 15, "*Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad."*[107] In any event, God is prepared to answer Abram's question, and to allay his fears with respect to the promise of a seed.

Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." **(15:4-5)**

One of the reasons we may be assured that the underlying concern of Abram is more than just the cultural importance of a son, is the language that we encounter in this chapter – both in verse 1 and in verse 4 – which is unique to the

[107] John 8:56

Abrahamic narrative thus far. It is the language of prophecy, with the characteristic opening, "*the word of the Lord came to Abram.*" We have already been informed at the opening of the chapter, that the things of which we are about to read came to Abram "*in a vision.*" There is a great deal of debate among the commentators as to which parts of Chapter 15 belong to the vision, and which were actually seen by Abram through his normal sense perception. It does not really matter, for what God shows a prophet in a vision is as real – arguably *more* real – than what that man might see with the eye and hear with the ear of flesh. C. F. Keil writes correctly,

> A vision wrought by God was not a mere fancy, or a subjective play of the thoughts, but a spiritual fact, which was not only in all respects as real as things discernible by the senses, but which surpassed in its lasting significance the acts and events that strike the eye.[108]

Two facets of the narrative point to the entire scope being within the vision that God grants to Abram. First, there is no clear demarcation between that which is vision and that which is in 'real life.' All which Abram sees is seen as if through the eyes of his flesh, yet we are introduced to the whole narrative with the instruction that these things were seen "*in a vision.*" Any determination between that which was 'vision' and that which was 'physical sight' would be arbitrary, with no guidance from the text to show the way. Second, the fact that these events were seen in a vision helps to explain the somewhat convoluted chronology – it is difficult to determine just how long the whole narrative takes, as the transitions from day into night are not clear. Visions transcend temporal sequence, so that Abram can easily go out in the middle of the day and see the stars that fill the sky, something he could not do with waking sight. What God revealed to Abram in this section of the patriarchal narrative, "was by a direct influence upon his mind, originating a train of ideas so far beyond the ordinary

[108] Keil & Delitzsch; 210.

range of human thoughts, or the penetration of human sagacity, and impressed with such unusual vividness and force as was sufficient to determine it to be a supernatural communication."[109]

That this passage is delivered as a vision, with the typical introductory formula of the prophetic, is hermeneutically significant. We are told explicitly later in the narrative that Abraham was a prophet; here we are introduced to that facet of his divinely-ordained character. This teaches us to treat Genesis 15 differently than the other parts – at least those that have passed so far – of the narrative, knowing that what we read here is bigger, so to speak, than just Abram's life and circumstances. Sailhamer notes that this prophetic framework hints to us that "there may be more than a little symbolic value to the events."[110]

God's response to Abram befits the patriarch's main concern, "*so shall your seed be…as innumerable as the stars in the night sky.*" This graphic imagery certainly must belong to Sailhamer's "more than a little symbolic value." In the midst of a vision that will contain the remarkable 'cutting' of the covenant beginning in verse 8, such a promise of innumerable descendants – literally *seed* – should not be limited to the mere physical descendants of Abraham, the nation of Israel. Indeed, the children of Israel were capable of being numbered, and the entire number of the elect of God is known to the Almighty. The divine promise here is hyperbole, but of such a nature as to challenge the faith of the old and childless Abram, who has already been told that in his seed "*all the nations shall be blessed.*" The promise was always bigger than just the nation of Israel, as John reminded those who heard him announcing the coming of that promised Seed,

> *…and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham.*
>
> (Matthew 3:9)

[109] Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown; 143.
[110] Sailhamer; 149.

And Paul confirms that the Gentiles were at all times included in this innumerable host of Abraham's seed,

> *Even so Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU."* (Galatians 3:6-8)

Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. **(15:6)**

This verse arrives somewhat abruptly in the passage, and may seem a bit out of place in light of the doubt expressed by Abram earlier, and the apparent challenge the patriarch issues to God in the immediate sequel. But that is exactly why the author takes a step away from the dialogue between Abram and God, to give his readers the inspired insight into Abram's heart, so that they might know that his questions and his desire for confirmation were not borne of unbelief. Hearing the promise of God concerning his descendants, and not yet knowing just how and when these things would even *begin* to be, Abram exhibited "that state of mind which is sure of its object, and relies firmly upon it."[111]

This momentous testimony to the faith of Abram is also placed here so that there will be no confusion as to the order of things once we have witnessed the sacrificial ritual that Abram is commanded to execute. Leupold, along with many others, notes that the divine revelation precludes any sense that Abram *earned* this imputation of righteousness by works of religion or piety.

> Perhaps the most marvelous thing about this word is the clearness with which it rules out all efforts and attainments of man as contributory factors in the justification. Workrighteousness is completely eliminated, a fact which again human reason might never have discerned but for divine exposition as granted to inspired men. But the only factor that counts in this transaction is faith, and

[111] Keil & Delitzsch; 212.

> even faith only in so far as it grasps God's promise, not faith as an achievement of man.[112]

It is commonplace among modern scholars to argue that this faith exercised by Abram did not have reference to Jesus Christ. On the one hand it is undeniable that we cannot prove a full and complete understanding of the messianic promise on the part of Abram. However, on the other hand, we may reasonably ask that if this faith was not placed upon that promise, how could it have been imputed to Abram as righteousness? We need only repeat from the beginning of this lesson the observation of Charles Simeon, "The faith of our father Abraham is consistently said to be the same with ours; but if his had not respect to Christ, it is essentially different from ours."[113]

As we consider the patriarchal narratives, it is very important that we do not lose sight of the over-arching theme of the Scriptures – the promise of the Seed of Woman who will bring redemption to God's elect. Thus we cannot limit our view to such temporal, though important, issues as a son for Abraham. Rather we must recognize that the call of Abram and the promise of a seed to be born from his own loins – and through Sarah – are all part of the foundational promise from Genesis 3:15. It is also critical to a right reading of the Old Testament text to realize that the men and women who were chosen by God to be in the lineage of the Promised One, oriented their own faith to this One, and not merely to the temporal fulfillment of personal desires or cultural respectability. While it is true that they could not understand fully what progressive revelation had not yet unveiled, it is also true that that which had already been revealed was sufficient to be the object of justifying faith.

"*And it was credited to him as righteousness.*" The word 'righteous' always causes debate among commentators, theologians, and believers in general. Especially in much of modern Christian literature, the term connotes perfection,

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[112] Leupold; 477.
[113] Simeon, Charles *Expository Outlines on the Whole Bible: Volume I* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House; 1956); 121.

sinlessness. But this is never the sense in which it is used in the Bible when referring to any man born of natural generation from Adam – nor is it the intrinsic meaning of the word itself. To be 'righteous' means to be in line with an approved standard. The root family includes the word for 'straight' as in 'not crooked.' A man may be called righteous in relation to another man, as David calls himself with regard to the quarrel that King Saul had with him. A man may be considered righteous in terms of his current thought and act with regard to the legal standard of which he is aware, as Enoch, Noah, and Job were considered righteous before God long before the Torah was promulgated.

Abram being credited with righteousness by no means is to be interpreted as Abram having achieved sinless perfection. The subsequent narrative will still give ample evidence that the patriarch was yet 'in the flesh,' as the apostle Paul would say. Rather it means that Abram's response to God's word was fully in line with the word itself: God's word is worthy to be believed; Abram believed God, 'took Him at His word.' Therein lies Abram's righteousness. Keil defines righteousness in the context of Abram's thoughts and behavior, "righteousness, as a human characteristic, is correspondence to the will of God both in character and conduct, or a state answering to the divine purpose of a man's being."[114]

Thus we have presented in Genesis 15 the essential feature of that righteousness that is acknowledged by God (which is the only righteousness that can properly be so called). *Faith* is that essential feature, rather than any particular work or any special heritage; *sola fidei*. "No external legal work whatever, but faith justified Abram before God, while as yet uncircumcised – a prechristian Scripture testimony that not in the way of law, but in the way of the promise which brings him salvation, does man attain to a righteousness valid before God, and that this righteousness, far from being self-effected, is as to its

[114] Keil & Delitzsch; 213.

foundation a righteousness imputed in faith, which grasps the salvations offered in Christ."[115]

And He said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it." He said, "O Lord GOD, how may I know that I will possess it?" **(15:7-8)**

The LORD speaks again to Abram in terms that would resonate with those who first read this history from the pen of Moses. *"I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur…"* is identical in tone and content with the common refrain found in the rest of the Old Testament, *"I am the LORD who brought you out of Egypt…"* Such statements are intended to teach us two things, at least. First, that it is God who calls man, not the other way around. Nothing in the anthropology of man in Scripture gives any grounds to think that God finds something meritorious within this man's heart, that He does not find in that man's heart, and therefore the LORD calls the first and not the second. Nor can the extension be made that God *foresees* something good in one man's heart (i.e., faith) which He does not foresee in another man's, and on that account calls the first and not the second. No, the biblical evidence is that these 'good things' are the *result* of God's call, and never the cause. The fullness of this theology of justification is not complete in the Abrahamic narratives. Nevertheless, immediately after hearing that Abram *"believed, and it was credited to him as righteousness,"* we are reminded that it was God *who called Abram*, not Abram who called God. In an exchange proving that Jesus knew Himself to be God, we read a very similar example of confession followed by a reminder who just Who called whom,

> *As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore. So Jesus said to the twelve, "You do not want to go away also, do you?" Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God." Jesus answered them, "**Did I Myself not choose you**, the twelve, and yet one of you is a devil?"*
>
> John 6:66-70)

[115] Delitzsch; 7.

The second thing we learn from the LORD's word to Abram is that when He calls, He calls *out from*. This has been and will be a recurring theme through the study of the patriarchal narratives and is especially true of Abram. But it is true of all whom the Lord calls – He calls them to *"come out from among them and be separate."* It is always important to note that this 'separatedness' is yet in the midst of the nations and never physically removed from them. It is therefore a separatedness of heart and mind, of affection and ambition. In the case of Abram with regard to Ur of the Chaldees, and Israel with respect to Egypt, the call of God did also include a physical separation from one group of people. Nevertheless, each came to be 'separate' unto the LORD in the presence of many peoples.

> *See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding* ***in the sight of the peoples****…*
>
> (Deuteronomy 4:5-6)

Abram is bold to ask God for a sign, something to secure in his mind the firmness of the promise, *"Oh, Lord God, how may I know that I will possess it?"* This question should not be viewed as flowing from unbelief, as was Zacharias' query of the angel in regard to the promised birth of John, but rather as belief seeking strength, as was the case with Mary when she asked the angel, *"How can these things be?"* God is condescending to His children, willing to graciously give them sufficient evidence to strengthen a faith that is already there, though not willing to allow faith itself to rest upon any evidence other than His word. Thus we are told in verse 6 that Abram believed, and only in verse 8 do we have his question, *"How may I know?"* Flowing from a believing heart, this question met with a gracious reception from God.

So He said to him, "Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon." Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds. The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away. **(15:9-11)**

It is interesting to note that the animals that are selected are 'clean' in accordance with the statutes of the later Torah, and were animals particularly designated for sacrifice upon the altar of the tabernacle. However, in spite of the many words printed by commentators upon this fact, it is not evident from the text of Genesis 15 what this correspondence signifies, nor even if what Abram is being told to do constitutes a 'sacrifice.' Unlike the usual sacrificial offering, these animals are – as far as we can tell from the text – neither eaten nor burned with fire, both of which are essential elements in any sacrifice.

What we have here is an ancient ritual that would have been quite familiar to Abram, as it has its history in ancient Babylonia/Chaldea. The practice was known as 'cutting the covenant,' and the Hebrew word for covenant, *b'rit* (בְּרִית), derives from the root verb 'to cut.' Gerhard von Rad comments, "When the animals are halved and laid opposite each other, and when the partners to the covenant stride through the lane that has been thus formed, they express thereby a curse upon themselves in the event the covenant is broken."[116] Each partner to the covenant binds himself to the dead animals – who were once one and whole as the two parties are within the covenant, but are cut in half, signifying the ethical import of one of the parties breaking the covenant thus cut. Separation and death are therefore enjoined to the partner who breaks the covenant. It was a very vivid practice, and probably more impacting upon the minds of the two parties than our modern version of signing names on the last page of a contract.

[116] Von Rad; 186.

> The proceeding corresponded rather to the custom, prevalent in many ancient nations, of slaughtering animals when concluding a covenant, and after dividing them into pieces, of laying the pieces opposite to one another, that the persons making the covenant might pass between them…God condescended to follow the custom of the Chaldeans, that He might in the most solemn manner confirm His oath to Abram the Chaldean.[117]

Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him.God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age. Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete."
(15:12-16)

As is often the case in Scripture when a man asks something of God, the answer given to Abram is probably not what he was expecting. First, he is informed that *he himself* will not inherit the land, but rather his descendants – but only after a long period of enslavement in a foreign land. This is the heart of the prophecy for which this particular narrative has been preparing the reader, and would have been of the utmost significance to Moses' original audience, who were about to witness the fulfillment of this prophecy.

It is hard to imagine these words brought Abram much comfort. We are told that the vision itself wrapped the patriarch in great darkness and terror. The Lord does speak comforting words to Abram with reference to his own life – that he would live long, and die peacefully. No mention of when or how the patriarch will see the *beginning* of this prophetic word, through the birth of a son of his own (and this omission introduces the subject matter of the next chapter). But the overall tenor of the answer is just what we now expect, having the further revelation of Scripture concerning the nature of faith, that it is "*the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.*" Abram's faith, like our own, was more precious than gold, refined seven times in the fire. The

[117] Keil & Delitzsch; 214.

patriarch, therefore, must look ahead into the future – seeing things that were very unpleasant – and strengthen himself in the knowledge that *"He who promised is faithful, and He will bring it to pass."*

Second, Abram is given instruction regarding the 'sin quotient' of nations, *"for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete."* Such a statement as this is of the same kind as that which we hear from the apostle Paul in his Mars Hill speech, that God *"appoints from one all the nations of the earth, and has established their times and their boundaries."* It is a reminder that God is the God of the whole world and not just of Israel or of the elect. It is a reminder that He is sovereign and holy, and that all mankind is responsible to Him and is to come under judgment by Him. It is also a reminder that no nation can exceed the limits of sin set by common grace. When the cup of iniquity is full, the nation will be made to drain it to the dregs.

> The statement implies that there is a progress in the course of sin and vice amongst nations as well as with individuals, and that, although it be long permitted, by the tolerant spirit of the Divine government, to go on with impunity, it will at length reach a culminating point, where, in the retributions of a righteous Providence, the punishment of the sinner, even in this world, is inevitable.[118]

It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram… **(15:17-18)**

This is one of the most powerful passages in the whole of Scripture. The ritual of covenant 'cutting' bound both parties to the covenant to the same fate, if either were to break the covenant – death. For this transaction to be viewed as a true and proper covenant, according to the meaning of the term and practice, then *Abram should also have passed between the divided carcasses*. But he did not. God alone – in the symbols that had become familiar to Moses' readers, the smoke and the fire – passed through. Consider the analysis provided by

[118] Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown; 146.

Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown in their commentary of the passage, where they speak of the cutting of the covenant as,

> …a symbolical act by which they obliged themselves to the covenant by all their hopes of peace and prosperity, or imprecated the Divine vengeance on their own heads in the event of their altering or violating the terms of the treaty…The patriarch did not pass between the sacrifice, and the reason was, that in the transaction he was bound to nothing. He asked a sign, and God was pleased to give him a sign, by which, according to Eastern ideas, *He bound himself*.[119]

It is impossible to make too much of this scene. It represents *covenantal monergism* in an indisputable form. It transforms the meaning of the Abrahamic Covenant into that which the apostle Paul most frequently refers: a *promise*. "There is no proper entering into a covenant; for God grants and confirms a promise to Abram, on which account it is He only who passes between the portions of the sacrifice. Hence it is not a covenant, in the sense of *pactio* (pact), but of *sponsio* (sponsorship)."[120] Keil adds,

> For although a covenant always establishes a reciprocal relation between two individuals, yet in that covenant which God concluded with man, the man did not stand on an equality with God, but God established the relation of fellowship by His promise and His gracious condescension to the man.[121]

Finally, Edersheim retains the language of the covenant, but also recognizes the powerful distinction between what God does here with Abram, and what man transacts with his fellow man.

> Then it was that the covenant was made; not, as usually, by both parties passing between the divided sacrifice, but by Jehovah alone doing so, since the covenant was that of *grace*, in which one party alone – God – undertook all the obligations, while the other received all the benefits.[122]

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[119] Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown; 146. Italics added.
[120] Delitzsch; 13.
[121] Keil & Delitzsch; 217.
[122] Edersheim; 64.

To your descendants I have given this land,
From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates **(15:18b)**

For the first time, God sets forth the geographical extent of the promise of land to Abram. There is debate, of course, as to the identity of the "river of Egypt," though no one supposes the phrase to mean the Nile River. The "river of Egypt" may be indeterminable, as the famous Rubicon is today. No doubt it was well known in the ancient world as the natural boundary of the nation of Egypt, though that kingdom often overflowed its boundaries.

It is widely believed that this prophecy has never come to pass, and many modern believers consider that these geographical boundaries represent the kingdom of Israel in the millennium. It is beyond the scope of a study in the life of Abraham to pursue the eschatology of the millennium in its political extent, but it is significant to note the testimony of Scripture with respect to the prophecy here granted to Abram. Consider especially the *language* of the following passage, concerning the realm of Solomon as recorded in I Kings.

> *Judah and Israel were* ***as numerous as the sand that is on the seashore in abundance****; they were eating and drinking and rejoicing. Now Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms* ***from the River to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt****; they brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life.*
>
> (I Kings 4:20-21)

Perhaps this is not the fulfillment of the prophecy, but the language is such that one may reasonably conclude that the historian of this passage in I Kings *considered* the reign of Solomon to be, if not *the* fulfillment, at least *a* fulfillment of the prophecy granted to the patriarch. If this is the case, then the hermeneutical principle may come into view, by which a prophecy once fulfilled need not be fulfilled again. Something to think about.

Week 8: The Sin of Synergism

Text Reading: Genesis 16:1 - 16

"Grief has an eloquent voice
when mercy is the listener."
(C. H. Spurgeon)

Genesis 16 seems to be such a complete mess-up as to have little or no instructive value to the believer. It is apparent from the start that Abram and Sarai go off the rails with their plan to provide an heir to Abram through Sarai's handmaid, Hagar. The similarity in language between Sarai's dialogue with Abram in Genesis 16, and Eve's conversation with Adam in Genesis 3, is so palpable that one cannot for a moment think that what is about to happen can result in any good. The reader is tempted to read Genesis 16, therefore, without a critical, theological eye – just to get through the sordid details, and perhaps glean another name of God – Jehovah Rohi – for the list.

But *"all Scripture is profitable…"* including Genesis 16. Indeed, there is not only a powerful theological teaching in this chapter – both *soteriological* and *eschatological* – there are also important *practical* and *ethical* lessons to be learned here. It is no coincidence that the narrative concerning Abram's 'going in' to Hagar immediately follows the that of the monergistic covenant cutting in Genesis 15. Presented with the 'one work' of God passing between the divided pieces of the animals, man responds with *synergism* – the attempt on man's part to assist God in the fulfillment of His divine and eternal purposes. This is the time-worn pattern of human response to God's word. The promise is received – either directly as in the case of Abram, or indirectly through the Word of God – and it is believed on, or better stated, the One from Whom the promise comes is believed in. Subsequently, however, the circumstances of life do not immediately – and perhaps not even for a long time – conform to or indicate the fulfillment of the promise. "But there is an obstacle which in human terms in

insuperable. This hard fact sets free human activity; human discretion takes control of the matter; impatience helps and finds a way out."[123]

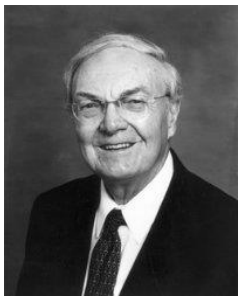
In the case of Abram and Sarai, human imagination did not have to search far or even strain itself. What Sarai proposes (no pun intended) to Abram in this chapter was commonplace among the nations of the ancient Near East, and is not uncommon even today in the same region of the world. This was a way to cut to Gordian Knot of Sarai's persistent infertility, compounded at this stage of her life, perhaps, by the onset of menopause. We need not assume that either Abram or Sarai doubted the promise of God with regard to the promised seed coming *"from the loins of Abram"* himself. They simply doubted the power of God to effect that progeny through the womb of Sarai. To their credit, perhaps, the word of the Lord had not yet specifically stated that the promised son would come from Sarai's womb; it was only in the previous dialogue between Abram and God that we learned for certain that the son would not be adopted, but would come from Abram's loins. Thus we may conclude with Leupold, who quotes John Calvin, "The faith of both was defective; not, indeed, with regard to the substance of the promise, but with regard to the method in which they proceeded."[124]

Abram and Sarai were being asked to think more deeply regarding the divine promise, and to remember the revelation that had gone before. They could think back to the incident in Egypt in which Abram sought to protect himself from the lecherous desires of Pharaoh with regard to Sarai – a narrative that is almost a mirror image of the one before us in Genesis 16. God preserved Sarai without defilement (as He would again do in the sordid encore with Abimelech, in Chapter 20), to show that it *mattered* to the divine promise that Sarai be preserved whole and undefiled as Abram's wife. They might have looked further into the past, to the original blueprint for the marriage

[123] Von Rad; *Genesis*; 196.
[124] Leupold; 493-494.

relationship, and been reminded that "*the two shall become one.*" Though polygamy was culturally acceptable, and among the wealthy class even prevalent, it would not have been difficult for Abram to realize that this state of affairs could not have been the means by which God would bring about the fulfillment of the promised seed.

There was nothing in Sarai's scheme that should have recommended it to Abram for approval. On top of everything else, Sarai's handmaiden was *Egyptian*, and not of the lineage of Shem at all. The whole of the story is summarized as a bald attempt by man to insert his own scheme in the place of the wise plan and purpose of God. "This scene illustrates the contrast between sovereign grace and freedom and human effort and slavery. The covenant people are dependent on God's sovereign works and purposes. To attempt to independently help God accomplish his purpose is what theologians call synergism. Synergism only leads to disaster."[125]



Bruce Waltke (b. 1930)

We are not privy to the rationalization that must have gone through Abram's mind as he convinced himself that Sarai's plan would be acceptable to God. But "*Abram listened to the voice of Sarai,*" a phrase so reminiscent of God's judgment upon Adam in Genesis 3, "*Because you listened to the voice of your wife…*" that the parallel cannot be missed. This is not to say, as some have concluded, that the man should never listen to his wife in any matter. It is, rather, to show that the closest relationship between two humans – that of husband and wife – must not be allowed to interfere with one's obedience to the word of God. Adam was told not to eat of the tree; he *'listened to his wife'* and ate, plunging the human race and all of creation into sin and corruption. Abram was told that the promised seed would come from his loins, and had every reason to expect that it would be through the consecrated marital relationship he held with

[125] Waltke, Bruce *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan; 2001); 256.

Sarai, but he too *'listened to his wife,'* went in to Hagar, and plunged his family and his posterity into turmoil. Synergism is not only not biblical, it is sinful and rebellious. When man leans upon his own understanding, he cannot but fall.

Now Sarai, Abram's wife had borne him no children, and she had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, "Now behold, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Please go in to my maid; perhaps I will obtain children through her. And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai." **(16:1-2)**

Ten years had passed since Abram and Sarai had entered the land of Canaan, along with at least two iterations of the divine promise of an Abrahamic seed. Yet Sarai had still not conceived. At the point we find Abram's wife in Chapter 16, despair of ever conceiving has set in. Some modern scholars surmise that perhaps menopause had occurred, an event that would mean to Sarai all hope of conception was gone. Certainly we cannot know this to have been the case, but *something* has convinced Sarai to introduce a different plan for the fulfillment of the promise – a surrogate mother to provide an heir to Sarai herself.

Andrew Fuller (1754-1815)

"At her time of life, she thinks, there is no hope of seed in the ordinary way; if therefore the promise be fulfilled, it must be in the person of another."[126]

It is generally assumed that Sarai's primary concern was for the success of the promise, the generation of a seed unto Abram so that the promise might be fulfilled. This is, perhaps, giving Abram's wife a bit too much credit, at least in light of the text itself. We have already discussed the fact that infertility was an almost unbearable stigma to a woman of the ancient world, and will see that Sarai's infertility would be at the root of the strife between mistress and maidservant in the current narrative. Sarai's own words in framing the proposition to her husband say nothing in terms of the divine promise of a seed. Rather, she proposes a scheme whereby she might obtain children through her

[126] Fuller, *Exposition of Genesis*; 66.

handmaid. Literally Sarai propositions that *"I may be builded up through her."* In the Hebrew there is a cognate relationship between the words for 'house' and 'build,' and for 'son' – the concept being that the building up of one's household was through procreation, and without the birth of sons, one's house lay desolate. "There was no greater sorrow for an Israelite of Oriental woman than childlessness. Even today among the Arabs the barren woman is exposed to disgrace and even grievous wrong."[127]

The situation with Sarai is quite similar to that of Eve, following the parallel already alluded to above. The prohibition upon eating from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil had been given by God to Adam, and apparently related secondhand to Eve by Adam. So also the verbal exchanges between Abram and God have been without Sarai present, or at least as far as the narrative describes. Thus the promise of the seed, if known to Sarai, was known as mediated by her husband, and not directly from Jehovah. It is probably most in keeping with the text, and with the cultural milieu, to assign almost strictly personal and selfish reasons to Sarai's proposition to Abram that he take Hagar to wife, and thus raise up a son to Sarai.

This, in itself, was no novel concept. The description of Hagar in the text indicates that she was Sarai's own personal possession, and not a slave of the household. Hagar was Sarai's to keep, or to give away, and did not belong to Abram directly. This fact of ownership introduces a cultural tradition well-attested in the extra-biblical archaeological data, that Hagar, being the sole possession of Sarai, could be introduced as a surrogate mother for her mistress. "As Hagar was not an ordinary household slave but the peculiar property of her mistress, any offspring which she might bear to Abram would be reckoned as Sarai's."[128] Von Rad comments,

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[127] Von Rad; 191.
[128] Orr, James, ed. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopædia*; 1316.

> If she gave her personal maid to her husband, in the event of her own childlessness, then the child born of the maid was considered the wife's child: The slave was born 'on the knees' of the wife, so that the child then came symbolically from the womb of the wife herself.[129]

There is a transfer of possession here, though the supremacy of Sarai as the first wife is at no time threatened or diminished. A similar situation is envisioned in the famous law code of the Babylonian king Hammurabi, where we read,

> If a man take a wife and she give this man a maid-servant as wife and she bear him children, and then this maid assume equality with the wife: because she has borne him children her master shall not sell her for money, but he may keep her as a slave, reckoning her among the maid-servants.[130]

This passage from Hammurabi's law code may indicate to us what was to become of Hagar at the end of the narrative, when she returns to Abram's household, as we are not told by the biblical text. Or it may shed some light on what we read concerning Sarai's harsh treatment of Hagar, that perhaps she had been demoted to the status of a slave rather than that of the handmaid of the mistress of the house. In any event, Hammurabi's statute (and there are several others of similar tone in Hammurabi) indicates that the giving of a maid-servant was a culturally acceptable means of 'building up' the household of a barren wife. But one of the ethical lessons of this story is that just because something is culturally acceptable, does not mean that it is acceptable in the sight of God. "Unbelief is very prolific of schemes; and surely this one of Sarai is as carnal, as foolish, and as fruitful of domestic misery as almost any that could have been devised."[131]

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[129] Von Rad; 191.
[130] Hammurabi's Code; para. 146. The Avalon Project, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/ancient/hamframe.asp.
[131] Fuller; 66.

After Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife. He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her sight **(16:3-4)**

There is a certain element of pragmatism in many believer's conception of the 'will of God.' If it works, it must be from God. By that logic, Sarai's plan was clearly of divine inspiration, for Hagar conceived after one visit by Abram to her tent. Modern pragmatic Christians ought to study this passage with vigor to learn that, with the will and purpose of God, the 'success' of human schemes in no way binds God to adopt such schemes into his overall plan. Indeed, 'success' is often nothing more than God's way of intensifying the ramifications of the error of synergism, as it will be seen to be the case in Abram's home.

The trouble starts immediately. Hagar, seeing that she has conceived, begins to act in a haughty and rebellious manner toward her barren mistress, apparently forgetting that, though she is Abram's second wife, she is still culturally and legally secondary to Sarai and under her mistress' continued authority. Hagar was to play the humble surrogate, and to acknowledge any child conceived via her union with Abram to be the offspring of her mistress, Sarai. But instead the proud Egyptian 'lorded it over' Sarai, acting in a manner that further aggravated the cultural and personal stigma that Sarai carried by being barren. Leupold comments that Hagar, "thought that God had bestowed upon her what He had denied Sarai, and so she thought herself superior to her mistress and showed her disdain in certain ways."[132] Delitzsch adds, "When Hagar found that she had conceived she felt herself raised above her former position, and behaved herself as if she had taken Sarai's place, her mistress, to whom she was indebted for her new position, being henceforth little accounted of by her."[133] But Sarai now faced the problem that Hagar was no longer entirely

[132] Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*; 497.
[133] Delitzsch; 16.

under her authority, for she had been freely given to Abram as a wife. In her bitterness and impotent frustration, Sarai lashes out at her husband.

And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done me be upon you. I gave my maid into your arms, but when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her sight. May the LORD judge between you and me." **(16:5)**

It is said that the ancient Chinese pictogram for the concept of 'turmoil' is that of two women under the same roof. Be that as it may, Abram certainly had turmoil on his hands with two women under his tent. "What a number of mishaps from this course of action, which endeavoured arbitrarily to bring about the fulfillment of the Divine promise instead of patiently waiting for it!"[134] Sarai's places the blame for the current situation squarely upon her husband, which makes the reader wonder whether she was quite rational at the time. Was not this whole plan of her own devising? But rather than questioning Sarai's sanity, we ought to see if there is another explanation, which there may very well be.

First, Hagar is now a wife of Abram and therefore no longer the property of Sarai, though as first wife Sarai retains the position of mistress over the Egyptian. Thus traditionally and legally Sarai has divested herself of any authority to deal with Hagar independently of her husband. Second, it may be – a probably was – the case that Abram had witnessed the haughty attitude of Hagar toward Sarai and had done nothing about it. Abram may have been temporarily enamored with Hagar due to the fact that the woman was now carrying Abram's seed, the answer to the divine promise. Thus if we give Sarai at least some benefit of the doubt, we can easily construct a situation wherein Abram has become complicit in the unrighteous ambition of the Egyptian slave over her Hebrew mistress. Even Hammurabi's code condemns the attitude of Hagar and, while protecting her from being sold, demands that she be reduced again to the status of a slave.

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[134] Delitzsch; 17.

It behooves us to try to explain Sarai's words as something more rational than a jealous rant, for she invokes the Lord in a traditional oath meant to confirm her own righteousness in the matter, *"May the LORD judge between you and me."* We have stated already that it is impossible to know just how far Abram had progressed at this point in his understanding of who Jehovah was, and of the covenant that had been inaugurated on the patriarch's behalf. It is even more difficult for us to know where Sarai stood in her knowledge and understanding of God and of the covenant. But this passage indicates that she knew enough to be able to appeal to Jehovah as the final arbiter of truth in any situation between man and man (or man and wife). Thus we have to assume that the turmoil in the tent was, while largely owing to Hagar's imperious attitude, also exacerbated by Abram.

But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her what is good in your sight." So Sarai treated her harshly, and she fled from her presence. **(16:6)**

Abram handles the situation in manner that does not cast him in the best light. Instead of issuing a pearl of wisdom, or rebuking Hagar himself, he rather passes the buck back to Sarai and restores to her full custody of the Egyptian slave. We are not given details regarding just what Sarai did to Hagar, *treating her harshly*, but it was sufficient to precipitate the Egyptian's departure from the home. It may be that Sarai applied corporal punishment, which was well within the cultural rights of the 'first wife' in the harem, upon consent of the husband which had been granted. It may be only that, in accordance with the provisions of Hammurabi's Code, Hagar was relegated to the status of a common household slave and could not stand the double loss of prestige – no longer favored by the lord of the manor, and now no longer even in the privileged position of handmaid to the mistress of the home. Commentators differ widely as to the relative merits of each of the three actors in the drama, but it is sufficient

to say that the whole narrative does not portray either Abram, or Sarai, or Hagar in a very good light.

Now the angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. He said, "Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from and where are you going?" And she said, "I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai." Then the angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority." **(16:7-9)**

Thus is introduced for the first time the 'Angel of the Lord,' an august being who will appear at various and momentous times throughout the Old Testament narrative. It is remarkable that his first appearance is to an Egyptian slave, and not to a great patriarch. But who is this 'angel'? The English word 'angel' is, in fact, somewhat of a gloss, and somewhat misleading. The word is *mal'akh*, or messenger (as in the prophet Malachi). The title of this exalted being is, therefore, the *Messenger* of Yahweh (מַלְאַךְ יְהוָה), and so the reader is relieved of the burden of having to imagine him with wings.

The Messenger of Yahweh appears at numerous times and in various circumstances throughout the Old Testament. "A study of these passages shows that while the angel and Jeh(ovah) are at times distinguished from each other, they are with equal frequency, and in the same passages, merged into each other."[135] Liberal scholars have argued that this merging of identity and authority is simply that of the ambassador, who speaks with the same authority as the king who sends him. But this is a very weak argument, for the ambassador, while speaking with the authority of the king, still does not use the first person voice, as does the Messenger of Yahweh, *"**I** will greatly multiply your descendants…"* (16:10)

Another theory is that the Messenger of Yahweh is a peculiar mode or manifestation of God, similar to the smoking furnace and the flaming torch of Genesis 15. This solution might work, if not for the instances where the Angel

[135] Orr, *International Standard Bible Encyclopædia*; Article on 'Angels,' Section II.3.

himself speaks *with* divine authority, and in the same context speaks *to* or *of* God in heaven. Vos writes, "The peculiarity in all these cases is that, on the one hand, the Angel distinguishes himself from Jehovah, speaking of Him in the third person, and that, on the other hand, in the same utterance he speaks of God in the first person."[136] Vos investigates various theories attempting to explain this phenomenon, showing each to be lacking in logic. He concludes,

> Of the two views discussed, the one neglects the distinctness between the Angel and God, the other neglects the identity between both. The problem is how to do justice to both. There is but one way in which this can be done: we must assume that behind the twofold representation there lies a real manifoldness in the inner life of the Deity. If the Angel sent were Himself a partaker of the Godhead, then He could refer to God as his sender, and at the same time speak as God, and in both cases there would be reality behind it.[137]

Charles Spurgeon saw no need to analyze various differing views, though many were prevalent in his day. "We have not much difficulty in deciding who the angel was that appeared to her. We are sure that this Angel of the Lord was that great messenger of the covenant who was afterwards to appear in actual flesh and blood, but who many a time before he was born at Bethlehem anticipated his descent to earth, and visited it in human form."[138]

The appearance of the Messenger of Yahweh to Hagar was an act of pure grace, for we have no reason to suspect Hagar of holding to the faith of Abram, or of calling upon the Lord in prayer. One commentator surmises that perhaps Abram and Sarai were interceding for Hagar back home in Hebron, but this is pure speculation without foundation in Scripture.[139] No, the very name that Hagar gives to the divine visitor (further indicating that the visitor was, indeed, divine), shows us that the basis of the encounter was not upon man *who calls*, but God *who sees*.

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[136] Vos, *Biblical Theology*; 72.
[137] Vos; 73.
[138] Spurgeon, C. H., Sermon entitled *Hagar at the Fountain*; MTP Volume 31; 614.
[139] Luther, *Commentary on Genesis: Volume 1*; 282.

Moreover, the angel of the LORD said to her, "I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they will be too many to count." **(16:10)**

God's intervention on behalf of Hagar was on account of Abram, the fact being that the child in Hagar's womb was a seed of the chosen covenant partner. This is not to say that God had no compassion on Hagar, for we are told in verse 11 that He *"has given heed to her affliction."* It is rather that the key factor in the narrative is a faithful God acting in accordance with His own covenant word. Nor does this mean, by any manner, that God was extending the covenant to include Hagar and her child, certainly not in the sense in which the covenant will be perpetuated through the child of promise, Isaac. It is rather the case that God is fulfilling His stated purpose in blessing those who are affiliated in a positive way with Abram/Abraham. We have no data from which to surmise how Hagar and Abram got along, nor do we have any indication that Hagar's bitterness was directed toward anyone other than Sarai. But that is not the issue here, for Hagar is carrying Abram's child, and that is what matters.

Thus the Egyptian maidservant is instructed to return to Abram and Sarai, which she does, and to continue to live there indefinitely and to submit herself to the authority of her mistress. Rather than champion the emancipation if slaves, which many modern Christians believe the Scriptures must be twisted to do, the instruction of the Messenger is to maintain the status quo. If the culture of Canaan in Abram's day followed the statutes later set down by Hammurabi, then Hagar may very well have been returning to a much lower position than that which she started: a slave instead of a maidservant. Nonetheless, Hagar obeys the word that she so clearly interprets to be divine.

The word to Hagar is a mixture of encouragement and warning with regard to the child in her womb. Echoing the promise that has already been made to Abram, the Messenger promises that the descendants of Hagar through this particular son will be too numerous to count, though the metaphors of the sand beside the sea or the stars of the night sky are not employed. Hagar's son

will be the progenitor of a vast portion of the human race, at least in the Middle East, just on account of the fact that he will be Abram's son. But the blessing is not entirely complete, for the child that comes from Hagar's womb will develop alongside the promised seed, and will be perpetually antagonistic to that promised seed. Abram and Sarai's folly will reap generational strife, and the second couplet of 'light & darkness' will soon be entering the stage: Ishmael and Isaac.

The angel of the LORD said to her further,
Behold, you are with child,
And you will bear a son;
And you shall call his name Ishmael,
Because the LORD has given heed to your affliction.
He will be a wild donkey of a man,
His hand will be against everyone,
And everyone's hand will be against him;
And he will live to the east of all his brothers." **(16:11-12)**

Hagar was undoubtedly pleased to hear that she would bear a son, a mark of special distinction for a woman in the Ancient Near East (as well as the modern Middle East). One wonders just how she felt when she heard this part of the prophecy, however, that tells her what sort of man her son would be, *"a wild donkey of a man."* The term may just as accurately be translated as 'zebra,' and it indicates an untamable creature that cannot be put under the bit and bridle. The description of Ishmael has become the classic description of the Bedouins in general, the 'Arab's whose very name means 'wanderer.'

Islam claims Ishmael as the ancestor of the Arab people, though ethnically the roaming inhabitants of the Middle East are equally descended from other characters in the patriarchal narratives: Esau, for instance, and Lot's sons Moab and Ammon. Yet it has been the traditional view of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian scholars that this child of the union of Abram and Hagar was the forerunner of the Arab people, with whom the children of the promise – the Israelites – have struggled for countless generations.

To what extent do stereotypes represent truth? Ethnic stereotypes have been the foundation of prejudice for the entirety of human history, and it is a valid complaint that stereotypes are the intellectual paradigm of the ignorant. But it is also undeniable that if a stereotype had no foundation in reality, it could not stick nor be perpetuated as a characterization of a people. Stereotypes exist because ethnic divisions with the human race *do* have certain general attributes that frequently characterize their members. And the history of the Bedouin peoples of the Middle East has consistently shown that they bear the imprint of their forefather Ishmael, *"His hand will be against everyone, and everyone's hand will be against him."* This description of Hagar's son was clearly intended not merely to characterize Ishmael's life, but also that of his descendants, and "such has been the character of the Arabians, who descended from him, in all ages; a wild and warlike people, who, under all the conquests of other nations by the great powers of the earth, remained unsubdued."[140] The current news from the Middle East does nothing to dissuade this timeless character of the seed of Ishmael, nor does their continued antipathy toward the promised seed of Abram, the Jews.

Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, "You are a God who sees"; for she said, "Have I even remained alive here after seeing Him?" Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; behold, it is between Kadesh and Bered. **(16:13-14)**

Scripture often marks the different stages or elements in the self-disclosure of God by the pronouncement of a 'name' of God. Leupold writes, "each new revelation of God's character and being was memorialized in a new name or some remark that epitomized the experience."[141] The one here in Genesis 12 is remarkably coined by an Egyptian slave, and a woman. *Jehovah Rohi* as it is frequently transliterated into English, *The God Who Sees*. But this is by no means to be limited to the divine omniscience or omnipresence. Hagar's exultation at the moment was not based on an esoteric attribute of the divine

[140] Fuller; 68.
[141] Leupold; 505.

nature, but rather *"Have I actually remained alive after seeing Him?"* Thus the name *Jehovah Rohi* is more comprehensive than just a reference to the divine omniscience, it encompasses the personal fact that The God Who Sees, sees *me*, and that this same God *permits me to see Him*. Such an exclamation on the part of Hagar has often been alluded to as proof that the Egyptian slave encountered God in a saving way, and this may very well be the case. Hagar was on the way to Egypt, and not to Damascus, but her experience was certainly comparable to that of the Pharisee Saul many centuries later.

So Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to him.
(16:15-16)

These two verses are epilogue, of course, wrapping up and summarizing the story at its conclusion. One may get the impression from the terseness of these verses that everyone lived 'happily ever after,' but this was not to be the case. Hagar and Ishmael would later be banished from the tent of Abraham, at the Lord's command, no less. As noted earlier, Ishmael and his descendants would be a continual thorn in the side of the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's child of promise, from that time until the present day. There was no redeeming the mistake that Abram and Sarai made with regard to Hagar, though it was all within the providential plan and purpose of God. Indeed, this living history was itself an allegory of redemption and of the rejection of the Messiah, the true Seed of Abraham, by the unbelieving Jews of Jesus' day.

> *Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise. This is allegorically speaking, for these women are two covenants: one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother.* (Galatians 4:21-26)

Week 9: Father of Many Nations

Text Reading: Genesis 17:1 - 27

"Our concern is to walk before him, and be upright,
leaving him to bring to pass his own designs in his own way."
(Andrew Fuller)

Thirteen years have passed, apparently without a word from the Lord to Abram. Silent years in which Ishmael is born and grows to the threshold of manhood. Years of tension in the household, with Sarai as Ishmael's adoptive mother, but the boy's natural mother, Hagar, looking in from the tent flap. Without a word from God, it is reasonable to assume that Abram concluded that his son by Hagar would be the promise heir, though without a word of confirmation from the Lord, he probably also has his doubts. It would not have taken a man of great theological acumen, or even of astonishing faith, to realize that the venture recorded in chapter 16 did not come off too well, and certainly did not seem to be the way God would have planned it. Still, the Lord had been quiet these thirteen years; maybe the birth of Ishmael had received the divine imprimatur and all would be well. Not hardly.

It is probably that God had waited until this moment in order to allow Ishmael to arrive at what was widely recognized in the Ancient Near East as the transition age between boyhood and manhood: thirteen. "Abram might have been thinking of initiating Ishmael into manly adulthood, perhaps through some current Mesopotamian or Canaanite rite of passage. God's covenant addresses this impulse, but as we shall see, it does so to specify its form and to transform its meaning."[142] Ishmael was about to take his place among the men of the community, and as the patriarch's only son he would have been given a notable position indeed. Although the text does not specify any details, one can easily imagine that the arrangements were being made – by whatever cultural ritual

[142] Kass; 309.

this momentous event in a male child's life was to be recognized in Abram's heritage. Perhaps Ishmael was to be sent off to live and hunt in the wilderness for a time; perhaps a great feast was to be prepared and sacrifices made to the God who had called Abram from his homeland; perhaps he would be betrothed to the daughter of a fellow Bedouin chieftain – all of which are documented as rites of passage in this or that ancient culture. Ishmael was of age to take his place as Abram's adult son, only he was not Abram's covenant son. *Entrer Dieu*.

The consequent appearance of God to Abram, recorded in Chapter 17, is a manifestation of new names. It represents a complete change in the characters of the narrative: though each remains the same person, each is altered in appearance in an indelible manner. God appears under a new and awesome name; Abram's name is changed to Abraham and Sarai's name to Sarah; and the promised child of the covenant himself is named: Isaac. We have come to understand that whereas names themselves are often given a special significance in Scripture, the *re*-naming of someone – especially when this is done by God himself – is an occasion of revelation and should be considered carefully. Such is the case in this chapter, with the reestablishment of the covenant with Abram/Abraham.

And it is a *re*-establishment of the covenant, rather than a second covenant. Liberal critical scholars have latched on to the statement in 17:2, "*And I will establish My covenant with you…"* as being the inauguration of a *second* Abrahamic Covenant, the first having been broken by Abram's illicit synergism in the matter of Hagar. This is an especially common view among the adherents of the Documentary Hypothesis, who see a different author whenever they see a different name for God, and view any recapitulation of an matter to be a different matter altogether, or the reflection upon the same matter by a different 'source.' But Leupold is correct when he begins his commentary on Chapter 17 by stating

unequivocally, "The basic fact to be observed for a proper approach to this chapter is that the covenant referred to is not a new one."[143] He goes on to say,

> Criticism confuses issues by claiming that our chapter gives P's account of the covenant which was covered by J's account in the somewhat different fashion in chapter 15. Consequently it need not be wondered at that the critical approach continually magnifies incidental differences and tries to set these two chapters at variance with one another.[144]

It is necessary, of course, to ask ourselves why such a reiteration of the covenant is found here, if it is not in fact a 'new' covenant with Abram. But that question must come *after* the recognition that the content of the covenant – a heritage in descendants and in land – is the very same as has been promised by God since Abram's first call from his homeland in Chaldea. The perfectly reasonable hermeneutical principle of *progressive revelation* fully answers the facts of the case: the core of the covenantal revelation does not change, though the parameters and specifics understandably grow as does the capacity of the man to comprehend and receive the greater revelation. It is not claimed that the *fullness* of the Abrahamic Covenant is to be found in Chapter 15; only the *beginning* of the covenant is recorded there. The monergism of the covenant and the centrality of faith are the twin pillars that will hold up all further revelation concerning the covenant and its terms. Thus the apparent conditionality of the covenant as stated in Chapter 17 must not be allowed to undermine the un-conditionality of the covenant as inaugurated in Chapter 15. But conditionality is evident in Scripture – the *if you do this, I will do that* from God. We must conclude that, while the core of the covenant remains monergistic and unconditional, there are elements in the outworking of the covenant – terms and benefits – that hinge upon conditions. Chapter 15 lays the immovable foundation of an unconditional, monergistic covenant between God and Abram, while Chapter 17

[143] Leupold; 511.
[144] *Idem*.

sets forth both the future appearance of that covenant, and the terms upon which it is to be maintained by Abram's descendants.

The silence of thirteen years is broken in a profound manner, with God announcing himself under a new name, *El Shaddai*, heretofore unknown to Abram. The power and meaning of this name causes Abram to fall on his face in reverence, and in shame for the attempt that he made along with Sarai and Hagar, to bring about the fulfillment of the divine promise through human means.

> ***Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him,***
>
> ***I am God Almighty;***
> ***Walk before Me, and be blameless.***
> ***I will establish My covenant between Me and you,***
> ***And I will multiply you exceedingly.***
>
> ***Abram fell on his face…*** **(17:1-3a)**

This is our introduction to the divine name *El Shaddai* (אֵל שַׁדַּי), which is translated by most English Bibles as 'God Almighty.' The Hebrew term *shaddai* is of uncertain derivation, and scholars differ as to the etymology; but there is general agreement that the word family from which it comes comprises the basic idea of 'strength, power' in the sense of decisive intervention.[145] Throughout the patriarchal narratives Moses employs various names of God: *El Elyon, Elohim,* and *Jehovah (Yahveh, LORD),* doing so in the interest of the understanding of his readers; but it appears from later testimony that this name will become the designation of God unique to the patriarchs in their own day. This is explicitly stated in Exodus 6,

> *God spoke further to Moses and said to him, "I am the LORD; and I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as* ***God Almighty****, but by My name, LORD, I did not make Myself known to them. I also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they sojourned.* (Exodus 6:2-4)

[145] Delitzsch; 31. *Cp.* Waltke; 259.

The introduction of this name at this point is probably best explained by the circumstances of Ismael's 'coming of age,' and the whole situation in which Abram's son came into the world: *synergism*. It is undeniable that Abram doubted God's power to bring forth a son for him through Sarai, who appears to have been beyond all natural hope of bearing children. "God is here called *El-Shaddai*, because through the supernaturalism of His procedure He, as it were, overpowers nature in the service of His grace, and compels her to further His designs."[146] Abram the Chaldean may have possessed an understanding of deity that was quite limited by natural forces – many pagan deities are thus constrained – but the God who called him from his pagan homeland was not such; He is *the Almighty God*, the Omnipotent

C. H. Spurgeon (1834-92)

One who is the Creator of Nature and thus cannot be limited by it. C. H. Spurgeon, in a sermon on the opening verses of Genesis 17, waxes eloquent concerning the impact of this divine name upon every believer, "The Lord is all-sufficient in power to accomplish his own purposes, all-sufficient in wisdom to find his own way through difficulties which to us may appear to be like a maze, but which to him are plain enough; and he is all-sufficient in love, so that he will never fail us for want of mercy in his heart, or pity in his bosom. God is God All-sufficient; simple as that truth is for us to speak, and for you to hear, it is a deep unfathomable, and did we really grasp its truth and dwell upon it, it would have a very wonderful effect upon our whole conduct."[147] It certainly had a wonderful effect on the patriarch's conduct: *Abram fell on his face.*

Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying,
"As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you,
And you will be the father of a multitude of nations.

[146] Vos; *Biblical Theology*; 82.
[147] Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Volume 18*; 650.

> ***No longer shall your name be called Abram,***
> ***But your name shall be Abraham;***
> ***For I have made you the father of a multitude of nations."*** **(17:3-5)**

The terms of the covenant are reiterated here, with the addition of the 'condition' from the previous verse: *"walk before Me and be blameless."* But is this a covenant condition, or is it the inevitable result of the covenant itself? There was no conditionality in the inauguration of the covenant in Genesis 15, and even here in the opening lines of Genesis 17, the tone is still powerfully monergistic. Notice the statement in verse 5, *"For I have made you the father of a multitude of nations."* It is not, *"For I **will make** you…"* but *"For I **have made** you…"* Yet this has not become a visible reality in Abram's life – he has but one son, Ishmael, who will not be counted by God as within the promised seed, much less being the progenitor of that seed.

The change of Abram's name to Abraham is also purely an act of God, as a father names his son, so here God gives to his covenant son a covenant name. But it is a prophetic name rather than a name of present reality – Abraham would never live to see the fulfillment of the covenant promise, but he would live out the rest of his days *"looking to it from afar."* The present reality for Abraham is that he is to *"walk before the Lord blamelessly."* Theologians and biblical scholars have bantered back and forth over this type of language for millennia – is it conditional? Is it cause or is it effect? Can the covenant be broken by the disobedience of its human members? This is the age-old 'works/grace' paradigm that has defied a universally accepted solution.

The most reasonable answer put forth in the Christian theological tradition is that of the Magesterial Reformers in the 16th Century. This is to say that *walking blamelessly before God* was never the *cause* of a sinner's justification, for, according to biblical anthropology and human experience, it is a criteria quite beyond both the ability and the will of fallen man. Yet it is also true, and no less true, than no sinner was ever saved who did not subsequently and

consequently *walk blamelessly before God*, though no man born of Adam by natural descent ever carried out that walk in complete consistency. Luther put the matter most succinctly when he said, "Man is justified by faith alone, but the faith that justifies is never alone." Justifying faith, which is itself the gift of God, is inevitably and 'naturally' productive of good works, of a life that *walks blamelessly before God*.

But perhaps, and even probably, we are reading too much into the term translated 'blameless' in this passage. It is common for readers to assign a consistent and stringent definition to all occurrences of such words as 'perfect,' or 'blameless,' or 'righteous.' But the context must always be taken into consideration. The admonition to *walk before Me and be blameless* comes immediately upon God's announcement of this 'new' name, *El Shaddai*. Is it not reasonable to interpret 'blameless' in terms of this new designation of God as the All-Sufficient One, especially in light of the shenanigans of Chapter 16? God is here saying to Abram, on the eve of his sponsoring his son Ishmael into the tribal community of manhood, "That did not work, Abram; from now on you are to walk as in My presence alone (heeding no other counsel) and be blameless (rejecting any further attempts to assist the divine providence)." Andrew Fuller comments that "it was the want of considering this [i.e., the all-sufficiency and power of God] that he had recourse to crooked devices in order to accomplish the promise."[148] Fuller then goes on to apply the admonition to all believers, "Our concern is to walk before him, and be upright, leaving him to bring to pass his own designs in his own way."[149]

This interpretation has the advantage of Abraham's subsequent behavior, which was not quite morally blameless, but nonetheless we will not find Abraham seeking out his own devices for bringing to pass the promise of God. True, he will still put in one more plug on behalf of Ishmael, but overall it

[148] Fuller; 69.
[149] *Idem*.

appears that he has learned this particular lesson and is now prepared (and has been prepared by God) to walk blamelessly before Him.

The overall reiteration of the covenant may be divided into three sections, each beginning with the same clause, "*And God said…*" The first section runs from verse 3 through verse 8; the second comprise verses 9 through 14; and the third verses 15 through 22. In this layout, the very important institution of the *sign* of the covenant, circumcision, is bracketed by the changing of Abram's name to Abraham, and the changing of Sarai's name to Sarah. The Abrahamic Covenant is beginning to take definite shape.

Father of Many Nations

Jewish and Christian scholars have dogmatically offered a multitude of different interpretations with regard to the two facets of the divine promise to Abraham – that of a posterity and that of the land. Here we have the promise of a very expansive posterity to come from the loins of the patriarch – the very change of his name indicating that he would no longer be merely *'exalted father'* – a somewhat ironic name for a man who had passed most of his adult life childless – to *'father of a multitude.'*[150] This is, of course, nothing more than an expansion of the original promise to Abram, that his seed would be as numerous as the sand on the seashore and the stars in the night sky. But here we have a certain political prestige and dignity attached to the promise: *nations* and *kings* will come from Abraham, not just a 'people.'

It is customary, but incorrect, to count within the fulfillment of this promise the descendants of Abram's son Ishmael, to whom God also promises a great posterity, and the descendants of Abraham through his third wife, Keturah. Even the descendants of Esau, the grandson of Abraham, are counted within the

[150] Waltke; 259.

multitude of nations deriving from the patriarch. It is true that these cadet branches of the Abrahamic line did indeed swell the number of physical descendants. But the terminology used here in the first part of the covenantal reiteration, coupled with what will be said of Sarah in the third section, precludes these other lines from consideration. Delitzsch follows the conventional wisdom on this matter,

> And while, where this promise is made to Jacob (Gen. 28:3; 35:11), and to Joseph (Gen. 48:4), 'nations' is meant of the national tribes to which the sons of Jacob should grow, we must here…understand not Israel alone, but all the nations of whom Abraham became the ancestor: the Arab tribes descended from him through Hagar and Keturah and the Edomite.[151]

But let us look again at the promise in the verses before us now. The most natural reading is to coordinate the blessings of a perpetuated covenant, as well as the promise of possession of the land, with the 'nations' that are to come from Abraham. But it will be made absolutely clear that the LORD did not intend to perpetuate the covenant with Ishmael or his descendants (*cp.* vv. 19-20). It is not natural, though it is plausible, to read the promise of the multitude of nations in the first clause as distinct from the perpetuation of covenantal blessings in the second and third clauses of this pericope. Consider the framework as it presents itself from the text:

> *I will establish My covenant with* ***you***
> ***You*** *shall be the father of a* ***multitude of nations***
> *I will establish My covenant between Me and you and* ***your descendants after*** *you*

From this it appears that 'multitude of nations' corresponds with 'your descendants after you,' to which the covenant will be perpetuated. Thus the 'nations' that will arise from Ishmael, the sons of Keturah, and the descendants of Esau cannot be considered as fulfillment of the content of Abram's new name.

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[151] Delitzsch; 33-34.

The Mother of Nations

To this consideration we add the third codicil in this portion of the covenant reiteration - the changing of Sarai's name to Sarah. We thus jump ahead to those verses in order to give an overall view of the meaning of the promise of 'nations' unto Abraham.

Then God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her." **(17:15-16)**

The text does not explain the significance of Sarai's name change as it did for Abram's. Both names – *Sarai* and *Sarah* – seem to mean 'princess' by almost universal consent among the Hebrew scholars consulted. The most that may be said is that Abraham's wife will go from being his particular princess – *Sarai* being perhaps a diminutive form of the general word – to a more universal princess from whom nations and kings will arise. Thus the content of the promise to Sarah is essentially the same as that to Abraham: He was to be the father of a multitude of nations, whereas Sarah will be the mother of nations. Sarah's part in the covenantal promise, as we should expect, overlays exactly with Abraham's. But certainly this precludes from consideration those descendants of Abraham who did not come *through Sarah* – in other words, all of

Abraham's sons except for Isaac.[152] Gerhard von Rad comments, "One does not grasp the meaning of this promise if one thinks primarily of the Ishmaelites, Edomites, and sons of Keturah; for the descendants about whom these words speaks are not to be sought among those who are outside God's covenant, even less since later the same promise is made to Sarah."[153]

Gerhard von Rad (1901-71)

This whole discussion has remarkable impact on our understanding of the Abrahamic Covenant and the promise of a multitude of nations. For if we are correct in overlaying the promise to Sarah of being 'a mother of nations' to that of Abraham, 'the father of nations,' then we must ask the question, "Just how many nations did Sarah directly produce?" The answer: One. Sarah gave birth to only one son, the son of promise – Isaac. The lineage continued from Isaac to two sons, but one of them despised the covenant and sold his birthright. Thus the seed of promise must be Jacob in the second generation from Sarah. And Jacob it is who becomes a nation – and significantly through a change in his name!

But if the descendants of Abraham outside the covenant line are not to be considered as the 'many nations' of which the patriarch is promised to be the ancestor, then who are the nations of the prophecy? For the answer to this we must look first backward, then forward. Back to the opening of the Abrahamic narrative, in Genesis 12, and forward to the apostolic interpretation of that narrative in Romans 4. We are given indication in the opening verses of the narrative that the covenant that is being established with Abraham had a significance and an application far beyond the patriarch's own family.

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[152] Esau, Abraham and Sarah's grandson, is excluded on the basis of the first criteria: he was explicitly excluded from the covenant.
[153] Von Rad; 200.

> *And I will make you a great nation…And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.* (Genesis 12:2-3)

Delitzsch comments, "…a nation of redemption is to be begotten, that it may become the redemption of the nations."[154] Again, as we have stated before, that which is found at the beginning of a period of revelation is usually foundational and should not be forgotten or abandoned in the course of later revelation. This expansion of the covenant blessing to the nations of the world through Abraham and his direct descendants, was *always* a primary purpose in God establishing the covenant at all. It was *never* meant to be solely applied to the physical descendants of Abram, and the later promise that Abraham would be the father to a multitude of nations must be interpreted along the lines earlier established, rather than by the rigidly genealogical branches of Hagar, Keturah, and the descendants of Esau.

Thus the apostle is not 'spiritualizing' the Old Testament text when he applies the covenant promise of a multitude of nations, not to the descendants of Ishmael or the sons of Keturah, but rather to those who "*are of the faith of Abraham.*" "[Abraham] is the father of those in every nation that by faith enter into the covenant with God, and are gathered under the wings of the divine Majesty."[155] Paul knows of only two branches of descent from Abraham – those of the 'Law,' which represents the lineage of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob/Israel, and those of 'faith,' who *alone* are the true seed of Abraham.

> *For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith…For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, (as it is written, "A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU") in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist. In hope*

[154] Delitzsch; 28.
[155] Henry; 90.

> *against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, "SO SHALL YOUR DESCENDANTS BE."*
>
> (Romans 4:13; 16-18)

Again, this is not a spiritualizing hermeneutic on the part of Paul, or on the part of Reformed theologians who follow the same line. Walke's division of interpretation between a 'biological' and a 'spiritual' lineage is neither true to the text nor sound theologically, as it sets up a false dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual. Such interpretations must first establish from Scripture that it was ever the divine intention to number Abraham's seed through any other son than Isaac, and this they cannot do. Accommodations of Ishmael, the sons of Keturah, or the descendants of Esau are just a continuation of the very *synergism* that got Abram into so much trouble. The promise of a multitude of nations flowing from Abraham's loins – *through the womb of Sarah* – can only be interpreted 'covenantally,' or in other words, in terms of the lineage of faith, to which seed along belong the promised blessings.

Week 10: Excursus: Circumcision

Text Reading: Genesis 17:9 - 14

"No rite or ceremony
enters into the essence of Christianity."
(Benjamin B. Warfield)

"In the Hereafter, Abraham will sit at the entrance of Gehinnom and will not allow a circumcised Israelite to descend into it."[156] Thus the Talmud presents what seems to be the Jewish equivalent to 'once saved, always saved' – once circumcised, always circumcised. However, the rabbis saw the need to account for Israelites whose lives were 'exceptionally wicked,' and acknowledged that circumcision itself could not overcome a truly evil life. What was to be done for the circumcised Israelite who was unworthy of Paradise? "[Abraham] removes the foreskin from children who had died before circumcision, places it upon them and sends them down to Gehinnom."[157] Thus is illustrated the indissoluble bond that developed in Jewish soteriology between the rite of circumcision and an Israelite's future hope, with the great patriarch himself as the guarantor of eternal blessedness.

But was circumcision intended to have such import? Is the ritual at the heart of the covenant, or does it rather point to the heart of the covenant believer? Once again we find ourselves at the *beginning* of a very significant Scriptural phenomenon, and so once again we pause to investigate as thoroughly as space and time will allow, just what this circumcision is and what it means. The narrative of Genesis 17 is straightforward enough to pass over the need at a verse-by-verse exegesis: God commanded Abraham to circumcise the male members of his household; this Abraham did in obedience to God's command. However, the association of the institution of this perpetual ritual with the expansion of the covenant in Genesis 17, is itself of great significance to our

[156] Cohen, A. *Everyman's Talmud* (New York: Schocken Books; 1975); 381.
[157] *Idem.*

understanding of the rite. Also extremely important is the fact that circumcision is called *"the sign of the covenant"* (17:11) and is even called the covenant itself (17:10). God draws a very close connection between the Abrahamic Covenant and the institution of circumcision, but it remains to be seen if this connection is fully co-extensive, whether the rite of circumcision is so much the essence of the Abrahamic Covenant that the eternal destiny of circumcised descendants of Abraham are – barring excessive wickedness – assured a place in Paradise. And, of course, the matter of the continuing significance of circumcision under the New Covenant must be addressed: does Christian Baptism take the place of Circumcision?

Circumcision in the Ancient Near East:

The first thing to note in any study on circumcision is the fact that the procedure did not originate with the Hebrews in the days of Abraham. In a similar manner to the covenant ceremony of cutting the animals and passing between them, the surgical procedure of removing the male foreskin was well known among the nations of the Ancient Near East, though it was by no means a universal practice at any time in either ancient or modern history. Nonetheless, Abraham had no need to ask of God just what He meant by 'circumcise.' Keil writes, "The rite was practiced in Egypt as early as the fourth dynasty, and probably earlier, long before the birth of Abraham."[158] Evidence of the practice of circumcision has been found among other inhabitants of Canaan, with the notable exception of the Philistines, and among ethnic groups as far removed as the native tribes of North and South America. Heroditus records from his own travels, the extensive use of circumcision in the ancient world.

> …the Colchians (near the Black Sea), the Egyptians, and the Ethiopians are the only races which from ancient times have practiced circumcision. The Phoenicians and the Syrians of Palestine themselves admit that they learned the

[158] Keil & Delitzsch; 153.

> practice from Egypt…and the Syrians…as well as their neighbors the Macronians (in Greece), say that they learned it only a short time ago from the Colchians (Black Sea inhabitants)….No other nations use circumcision, and all those who do are without doubt following the Egyptian lead. As between the Egyptians and the Ethiopians, I cannot say which learned from the other, for the custom is evidentially a very ancient one; but I have no doubt that the other nations adopted it as the result of their intercourse with Egypt, and in this belief I am strongly supported by the fact that Phoenicians who have contact with Greece drop the Egyptian usage and allow their children to go uncircumcised.[159]

Scripture itself bears witness to nations surrounding Israel with whom the practice of circumcision was common, though by no means associated with the Abrahamic Covenant,

> *"Behold, the days are coming," declares the LORD, "that I will punish all who are circumcised and yet uncircumcised – Egypt and Judah, and Edom and the sons of Ammon, and Moab and all those inhabiting the desert who clip the hair on their temples; for all the nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised of heart."* (Jeremiah 9:25-26)

Two relatively consistent characteristics of the ritual of circumcision in the nations beyond the Hebrews draw important distinctions with the sign of the covenant instituted here in Genesis 17. First, circumcision was rarely, if ever, universally observed within any ancient culture. In Egyptian society, for instance, it was reserved for the upper classes, and perhaps only the priesthood. This fact indicates that the surgical procedure was indicative of a separation between certain members of a society and all the rest. If limited to the priesthood, then the meaning of circumcision would most assuredly have been religious. But there is evidence that it was not so limited, with members of royalty and even the military and wealthy merchant classes employing the ritual, indicating that it possessed a social aspect to it as well. There is no indication from the ancient records that any medical significance was attached to the procedure, though the fact that it involves the male organ of procreation

[159] Heroditus; *Histories* 2.104.

demands an association with the sexual act. In this there is a similarity, as well as a profound difference, with the Abrahamic ritual.

The second characteristic, which appears to be all but universal with the sole exception of the Hebrews, is that circumcision, when it was practiced, was performed on boys at the threshold of manhood: i.e., at the onset of puberty. "It was a rite which celebrated the coming of age of the person. It signified the attainment of puberty and of the right to marry and to enjoy full civic privileges."[160] Josephus records, "But as for the Arabians, they circumcise after the thirteenth year, because Ishmael, the founder of their nation…was circumcised at that age."[161] But the 'Arabians' were not the only people who performed the surgery at the transition from boyhood to manhood. This fact intensifies the sexual and procreative aspects of the procedure, as it also highlights the uniqueness of the Abrahamic institution, which was to be done on every male infant on the eighth day of life. To be sure, circumcision was performed on grown men – as it was in Abraham's case, and upon the men of Schechem in the days of Jacob, and on Gentile proselytes to Judaism – but the perpetual ordinance of the covenant clearly stipulates circumcision of infant boys on the eighth day.

> Thus, from its inception, infant circumcision was the distinctive Israelite custom, not derived from Egyptian or other practice, and contrasting sharply with the puberty rites of other nations.[162]

This early application of circumcision to the Hebrew children must be considered in the light of what the ritual had come to mean in the ancient world; what the patriarchs would know of it from their neighbors. Thus a critical aspect of the meaning of circumcision will appear from the apparent inconsistency of a surgical procedure associated with the male organ of procreation, which was to

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[160] Orr, James et. al. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopædia: Volume 1*; 657.
[161] Josephus, *Antiquities* 1.12.2.
[162] Douglas, J. D. et. al. *The New Bible Dictionary* (Wheaton: Tyndale House; 1991); 210.

be performed on babies just out of the womb – with no consideration of their own capacity to advance the race. The association with procreation remains, but it is starkly contrasted with the infancy of the one being circumcised. This aspect of the ritual may have been the most profound distinction between circumcision among the Hebrews, and circumcision among the nations. To the Egyptians, Ethiopians, and Edomites the practice of the Hebrews probably seemed nonsensical in the extreme.

The Sign & Seal of the Covenant:

We turn now to consider the text of Genesis 17, providing the institution of the covenant sign and seal, circumcision, and to survey briefly the significance of this ritual under the Old Covenant.

God said further to Abraham, "Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. **(17:9-11)**

It is clearly established here that circumcision is the *sign* of the covenant God established with Abraham, though we must remember, as the apostle Paul points out, the ordinance of circumcision was enjoined upon Abraham *after* the covenant was first established (Genesis 15). The priority of faith over circumcision forms an integral part of the Pauline soteriology as the Gospel of Jesus Christ moves out from Israel to the Gentiles. Indeed, one does not have to wait for the apostle to learn that the operative force within the covenant is not circumcision, but rather faith. The prophet Jeremiah, as we have already seen, is no less strident than the apostle Paul in claiming that circumcision without accompanying faith, is 'uncircumcision.'

Yet it is both true and significant that circumcision is the first *sign* associated with the Abrahamic Covenant, for no such sign is given in Chapter 15. Therefore we must ask the question, 'In what sense does circumcision signify the

covenant?' We have already established that the practice of circumcision was universal enough so as to be anything but unique to the descendants of Abraham, the only exception being that the other nations did not circumcise infants. Additionally, circumcision was not such a sign as would be immediately apparent, for it involved the 'less seemly members' of the body, which are in all cultures kept hidden from public view. Other religious symbols from the nations surrounding Israel included the clipping of the corner of the hair, and the inscribing of tattoos, very visible 'signs' that were forbidden to the Israelites. Theirs was a private sign administered to the private parts.

Furthermore, the rite was to be performed only upon the males of the household, even though the practice of female circumcision, while much less common, was nonetheless practiced among the ancients and is still practiced today. If circumcision were borrowed here from the surrounding nations, to serve as a sign of the Abrahamic Covenant, then we must ask the significance of it being applied solely and strictly to males and not to females. Does this mean the women of the tribe were not considered members of the covenant people? There is no support for such a conclusion in Scripture, and there is at least this direct comment from the Lord Jesus with regard to the woman who had been bent double for eighteen years,

> *But the synagogue official, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, began saying to the crowd in response, "There are six days in which work should be done; so come during them and get healed, and not on the Sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites, does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the stall and lead him away to water him? And this woman,* ***a daughter of Abraham as she is****, whom Satan has bound for eighteen long years, should she not have been released from this bond on the Sabbath day?"*
>
> (Luke 16:14-16)

No, the application to the male child only must have an explanation other than the exclusion of the female from the covenant family. The next logical explanation would be to see in this ritual a purification or cleansing of the

instrument of procreation, through which the sperm (seed) is transmitted to the woman in conception. This line of reasoning would be in concert with the theory that the sin of Adam is passed down through the male line, that component of conception that was conspicuously missing in the birth of Jesus Christ. Thus we might see in Abrahamic circumcision the promise of the sinless Seed of Abraham, who is also the Seed of Woman promised so many centuries before. As circumcision has often been associated with 'cleansing' the organ of procreation – though there is no medical basis for this contention – this explanation offers itself as a plausible solution.

However, we must remember that, except for the initial circumcising of the Abraham and his dependents, the circumcision of Israel by Joshua before their entrance into the land, and the later circumcising of proselytes, the *normal* procedure to be followed was to have the male child circumcised on the eighth day after his birth.[163] Thus the ritual is removed from the common puberty/procreation rite that it served in so many other nations of the ancient world. Indeed, circumcising the infant of eight days did not speak of his own cleansing for procreation, but rather of the manner of his own conception. The emphasis in the establishment of the ritual as the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant, is upon the *removal of the flesh of the foreskin*, signifying evidently an alteration in the mode or manner of reproduction.

Significant also are the words that accompany the institution, "*and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.*" If we take our lead from the 'sign' of the Noaic Covenant – the rainbow – we learn that the sign of a covenant is as much *for God* as it is for man.

> *I set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Me and the earth. It shall come about, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow will be seen in the cloud, and I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every*

[163] Due to the possibility of the day of circumcision falling on a High Feast day, or the possibility of other legitimate hindrances to circumcision on the eighth day, the rabbinic writings allow for circumcision to be no earlier than the eighth, but no later than the twelfth day.

> *living creature of all flesh; and never again shall the water become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the cloud, then I will look upon it, to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth."*
>
> (Genesis 9:13-16)

Thus it is reasonable to conclude that the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant was a symbol *to God* as it was *to man*. This is not, of course, to intimate that God might forget who are His and who are not, for *"the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, 'The Lord knows those who are His.'"*[164] The sign of the covenant, therefore, was a reminder throughout the generations *of the covenant made between God and Abraham*. It did not necessarily mean that the circumcised child was among the elect of God – for it was initially administered to the entirety of Abraham's household, including Ishmael who was explicitly *not* part of the covenant. But as a sign or symbol, it pointed back to the covenant of grace (which was ratified, if we may say, not by circumcision but by faith), and it pointed forward to the fundamental promise of that covenant: an heir.

We cannot overlook the fact that the institution of circumcision as the sign of the covenant occurs in the chapter wherein the promise of a son is made most clear to Abraham. The patriarch's name is changed; the promised son is to come from Abraham's wife, whose name is also changed; and the promised heir of the covenant is himself named by God, *Isaac*. These aspects of the expansion of the *terms* of the covenant are integral to the institution of circumcision as the *sign* of the covenant, and the latter cannot be understood other than in the context of the former. Thus we may conclude that circumcision as the sign of the covenant between God and Abraham, served throughout the generations as the symbol of a miraculous seed: first Isaac, who would be born to Abraham and Sarah in a manner wholly unnatural (though not supernatural), and then Jesus Christ, who would be made flesh apart from the intervention of the male seed, and thus wholly (and 'holy') apart from the sin of the flesh.

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[164] II Timothy 2:19

And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants. A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant. **(16:12-14)**

This is a crucial passage to the understanding of circumcision as the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant, for it expands the terms of the covenant *beyond* the actual physical descendants of Abraham and of his posterity. The procedure of circumcision was by no means limited to the physical descendants of Abraham, but was to be assiduously applied to *every* male within the household, regardless of ethnicity or the manner by which his parents came to be in the home. The household of Abraham and of each of his descendents was to be oriented toward the covenant through the sign of circumcision. To be sure, the core of this covenantal community was Abraham, his son Isaac, and Isaac's son Jacob (though, undoubtedly, Esau was also circumcised). The nation of Israel under the Mosaic dispensation was to continue the rite of circumcision as it was delivered to Abraham – *"every male among you who is eight days old is to be circumcised throughout your generations…"* There was no provision made whereby circumcision would be limited to the children of the Israelites and denied to all other males who were part of the household by means other than natural generation.

It would appear, therefore, that the sign of the covenant actually does *not* have to do with the parental relationship within the covenant, as the role of Abraham as the father applied only to Ishmael, and later Isaac and the sons of Keturah. There were far more men within the household of Abraham, and undeniably far more male children born to the servants and slaves of Abraham than to himself. The application of the sign of the covenant was *tribal*, not *familial*. All were to be circumcised. "Anyone who had experienced the rite of

blood stood within the scope of the covenant which existed between the tribe and the tribal god, and enjoyed all the privileges of tribal society."[165]

One final point should be made with regard to this particular passage in Genesis 17: *Why the eighth day?* Men have waxed eloquent in recent times about the eighth day being the day on which the clotting properties of the infant's blood are first fully developed. But circumcision is performed countless times in hospitals all over the world, on children only a day old, and without ill effect. No, such 'medical' explanations merely manifest a lack of knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures, for there we find that a woman and her infant male child remained 'unclean' for a period of seven days after she delivers (Lev. 12). Hence the eighth day was the first day of 'cleanness' for the child.

Circumcision of the Heart

As with many aspects of God's redemptive revelation, the earliest manifestation the rite and role of circumcision is very rudimentary, with expansion and growth to follow. The idea of removing the 'foreskin of the flesh' from the male organ of procreation was soon associated in the Levitical writings with 'cleanness,' and uncircumcion associated with 'uncleanness.' The hermeneutic of progressive revelation does not attempt to find the fullness of the revelation in the earliest appearances of the concept, but nonetheless can see traces of the expanded meaning even in the seminal form. So it is with circumcision; it was never intended to be simply a physical surgery denoting in the body the members of the Abrahamic Covenant. Governing the sign of the covenant is the conduct within the covenant: *"walk before Me and be blameless."* It did not take long for the biblical language to bring these two things together.

We have already seen from the prophet Jeremiah, that when Israel behaved wickedly their circumcision was to them uncircumcision, a point that Paul reiterates in his epistle to the Romans. Yet long before Jeremiah came on

[165] Orr, *International Encyclopædia*; 657.

the seen we read of the 'circumcision of the heart,' bringing the deeper, spiritual significance to the physical ritual. "In this way circumcision in the flesh became a symbol of the circumcision, *i.e.* the purification, of the heart."[166] Moses holds forth the promise to Israel of this heart surgery, and reminds the people that God had not yet performed this operation.

> *Yet to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear… Moreover the LORD your God will* ***circumcise your heart*** *and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.* (Deuteronomy 29:4 w/30:6)

This was always the import of the Law, added hundreds of years later to the covenant sign of circumcision – that *walking before God in blamelessness* would characterize the children of Israel, manifesting in them a circumcision of the heart by faith that corresponded to their circumcision of the flesh by hands.

> *Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the highest heavens, the earth and all that is in it. Yet on your fathers did the LORD set His affection to love them, and He chose their descendants after them, even you above all peoples, as it is this day. So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer.* (Deuteronomy 10:14-16)

Notice also the mooring of this passage from Leviticus to the covenant first established with the patriarchs, tying the continuance of the covenant blessings to the people of Israel repenting of their 'uncircumcised hearts,'

> *If they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their forefathers, in their unfaithfulness which they committed against Me, and also in their acting with hostility against Me – I also was acting with hostility against them, to bring them into the land of their enemies – or if their* ***uncircumcised heart*** *becomes humbled so that they then make amends for their iniquity, then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and My covenant with Abraham as well, and I will remember the land.* (Leviticus 26:40-42)

[166] Keil & Delitzsch; 227.

Thus, once again, the apostle is not spiritualizing when he writes to the Roman church,

> *For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.* (Romans 2:25-29)

The majority of what Paul has to say about circumcision, and its ultimate significance, has to do with this divine operation upon the sinner's heart, the passages making the connection between the 'circumcision of the heart' and the believer's justification through regeneration far outnumber those with a correspondence between circumcision and baptism. It is sufficient to say that, for Paul, the fulfillment of circumcision is the work done in regeneration, the removal of the unbelieving heart of stone, and the recreation of the new heart and man.

> *But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.* (Galatians 6:14-15)

The role of circumcision as the dividing marker between the children of the Abrahamic Covenant and the rest of the world is also fulfilled and abolished in Christ Jesus,

> *Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called "Uncircumcision" by the so-called "Circumcision," which is performed in the flesh by human hands— remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.* (Ephesians 2:11-13)

Paul spends a great deal of time in his letter to the Galatians, remonstrating with them about their desire to be circumcised, going to great lengths to show that circumcision is no longer of value with regard to the sinner's justification. Now that Christ has come, the Seed to whom the rite of circumcision first pointed, circumcision has lost all but its most basic, ethnic marker status. To the Jew circumcision retains its ethnic meaning, but it no longer holds its covenant meaning. To adopt that marker as a Gentile is to predicate justification on ethnic status, which is a major component of the 'gospel' against which Paul argues and upon which he calls down 'anathema'! He is more succinct to the Philippians, though no less stern,

> *Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh…* (Philippians 3:2-3)

The symbolic meaning of circumcision as applied to the heart does not take away or diminish the significance of the physical surgery itself. The two are inextricably tied together, when one understands that the physical sign of circumcision was not intended merely to signify the uncleanness of human nature, but rather to point forward to a Promised Seed – first Isaac through whom the covenant would be perpetuated, then Jesus, in whom the covenant would be fulfilled. The *spiritual* significance of circumcision could never be realized apart from the *physical* significance – the Promised Seed would be the One who would circumcise the heart.

Circumcision and Christian Baptism:

It remains to touch upon the connection, if such exists, between the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant, circumcion, and the seal of New Covenant, baptism. The issue at point, of course, is the biblical veracity of the practice of infant baptism, known as *pædobaptism* (*pædo* being the Greek for small child). The

opposing view, called *credobaptism*, holds that the water of Christian baptism is only properly applied to those who have expressed faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (*credo* = 'I believe").

It must be noted at the outset that not all Christian confessions in which *pædobaptism* is practiced make the connection between this rite and the covenant sign of circumcision. Gerhardus Vos, himself a staunch advocate of the practice of infant baptism in the church, acknowledges that its theological connection to the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant was formulated during the Protestant Reformation. He writes, "In Switzerland the Reformers had come into direct conflict with the Anabaptists. This external circumstance may have already caused them to appreciate the covenant concept. In their defense of infant baptism they reached for the Old Testament and applied the federal understanding of the sacraments to the new dispensation."[167]

Anabaptists, and their descendants the Baptists, have offered up many arguments against the practice of infant baptism, some good and others no so good. A great deal of time has been wasted in discussing the proper *mode* of baptism (immersion versus sprinkling), time that should have been spent discussing the proper *recipient.*

The *pædobaptist* within the Reformed tradition predicates the transference of circumcision to baptism – and hence its application to infants – upon 'Covenant Theology.' Thus Vos states, "If the work of salvation has a covenantal form at its roots, then the rest of its unfolding is bound to correspond to it and proceed in a covenantal way."[168] This argument presupposes that the covenants are the proper framework for understanding biblical revelation, but it is beyond the scope of this current study to attempt a refutation of that contention.

If, however, we take the covenantal view, then we, like the *pædobaptist*, may conclude that the sign of the New Covenant immediately replaces the sign

[167] Vos, *Redemptive History*; 236.
[168] *Ibid.*; 252.

of the Old/Abrahamic Covenant – baptism replaces circumcision. In defense of this conclusion, the following citation from Paul to the Colossians is almost universally employed.

> *For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority; and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.* (Colossians 2:9-12)

There is no denying that the apostle mentions circumcision is such close proximity to baptism, that one may conclude that the latter replaces, or at least corresponds, to the former. But if we extrapolate this fact to the application of baptism in a one-to-one correspondence to circumcision – and prescribe the infants of believers to be baptized – does this practice answer to the meaning and significance of circumcision? Also, what does infant baptism say with regard to the New Covenant, of which the baptized child is now a member?

To the first question we have several comments. First, as we have already seen, the administration of circumcision *was not* familial but tribal. To be consistent, *pædobaptists* must baptize not only their children, but also the children of their servants and slaves. Obviously this point is moot in 21st Century America, but it was not so in the antebellum South where Presbyterianism was strong, but the baptizing of the children of slaves was not practiced. Furthermore, the connection between the covenant and the person circumcised is a tenuous one, at least at the beginning. Ishmael was circumcised, as we must assume Esau was as well. Neither man was included in the covenant of their father Abraham. This is not to detract in any way from the fact that circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant, but only to say that this 'sign' apparently signified something other than the familial connection as part of the 'covenant people.' As was established earlier in this lesson, that 'something

other' was the promise of the seed, a promise fulfilled by the birth of Jesus Christ.

Yet if we grant that baptism now corresponds to circumcision as the sing of the New Covenant, and allow that the sign should be applied as it was in the case of circumcision (*i.e.,* to infant children, but now also including infant females), what then have we conferred upon these children? The Reformed *pædobaptist* is consistent in his answer to this question, an answer that is summarized as follows by Warfield,

> Naturally, therefore, this sign and seal belongs only to those who are the Lord's. Or, to put it rather in the positive form, this sign and seal belongs to all those who are the Lord's. There are no distinctions of race or station, sex or age; there is but one prerequisite – that we are the Lord's. What it means is just this and nothing else: that we are the Lord's. What it pledges is just this and nothing else: that the Lord will keep us as His own.[169]

Earlier in the same article, entitled 'Christian Baptism,' Warfield described the meaning of baptism in words that any Baptist could accept – so long as they were not applied to infants.

> It means that by receiving baptism they indicate that they are in Christ, participants in the benefits of his death and resurrection; and that these benefits are now sealed to them under the sanction of a covenant promise. W e are now like documents to which the seals have been attached. We may think that a signet ring with the name of the Lord upon it has been impressed upon us to authenticate us as his forever.[170]

But Warfield, and *pædobaptists* by definition, does apply these words to infants. Immediately after the citation above in which he asserts that baptism belongs by right to all who belong to the Lord, he argues,

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[169] Meeter, John P. *ed.*, *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield; Volume 1* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed; 1980) 328.
[170] *Ibid.*; 327.

> We need not raise the question, then, whether infants are to be baptized. Of course they are, if infants, too, *may* be the Lord's. Naturally, as with adults, it is only the infants who are the Lord's who are to be baptized; but equally naturally as with adults, all infants that are the Lord's are to be baptized….Circumcision, which held the place in the old covenant that baptism holds in the new, was to be given to all infants born within the covenant. Baptism must follow the same rule.[171]

But Warfield's argument, along with all defenses of *pædobaptism*, begs the question. It assumes as true a point that must be proven: that children of believers are 'within the covenant.' If this could be proven – along with the assertion that baptism holds the same place in the new covenant that circumcision did in the old (another point assumed that must be proven), then infant baptism could be justified. But if thus justified, what keeps infant baptism from corresponding directly to baptismal regeneration? Warfield himself has vigorously stated that the blessings and benefits of the covenant are secured by the promise of God, so that if we assume a covenantal form of redemption, why do we not conclude that the baptized infants of believers are fully and finally redeemed? Reformed *pædobaptists* do not, as a rule, make this assertion, but that is in spite of the logic of their case rather than because of it.

Credobaptists conclude, therefore, that while Warfield is correct in stating that the covenant sign and seal of baptism belongs by right and command to all who are the Lord's, the only indication we have under the New Covenant that any man or woman does belong to the Lord is his or her profession of faith. Infant baptism is founded on unsubstantiated assertions regarding the familial nature of the covenant, upon a tenuous connection between circumcision and baptism, and upon faulty reasoning regarding what it means to be a member of the New Covenant. It thus grants every covenant blessing and benefit to the infant except the one that truly matters: salvation. Its logic is faulty, and its conclusion wrong.

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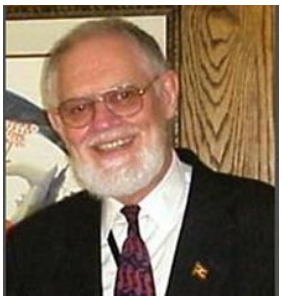
[171] *Ibid.*; 328.

Week 11: **Personal vs. Political Justice**

Text Reading: **Genesis 18:1 - 33**

"When the measure of iniquity was full,
no intercession could avert the judgment."
(Carl Friedrich Keil)


Henry Krabbendam

Dr. Henry Krabbendam tells the story of a time when he was en route to Uganda, a frequent destination for the Reformed professor and missionary. He was reading his Bible when he noticed the fellow next to him glancing over to see what Dr. Krabbendam was reading. When he acknowledged his companion's interest, and confirmed that it was the Bible that he we reading, the man seemed quite please. As Dr. Krabbendam tells it, he said to the man, "You are pleased that I am reading the Bible, for you think that God will keep this plane in the air on account of me. But perhaps He will take it down *on account of you!*" Those who have met Dr. K will not doubt that he did indeed say this, or something very much like this, to the man. Be that as it may, the story does illustrate a commonly held notion within the scope of human ethics: that God (or the gods) will reward the just, and punish only the wicked. But what do we make of the situation wherein divine judgment is due upon the wicked, though a righteous man is sitting right next to him on the plane? Can it be said, historically-speaking, that the righteous are never caught up in the judgment meted out upon the wicked?

This is the issue before us in the section of the Abrahamic narrative contained in Genesis 18. Judgment is due upon the wicked cities of the plain – Sodom, where Lot pitched his tent, and her sister city Gomorrah, as well as a couple of 'suburbs' in the vicinity. We have already been told of the nature of the inhabitants of these cities, "*Now the men of Sodom were wicked exceedingly and*

sinners in the presence of the LORD."[172] It appears that the 'measure' of the iniquity of the men of Sodom had reached its fullness, and the time has come for judgment.

Somewhat surprisingly, Abraham becomes an advocate for the cities, or at least for the 'righteous' who might be found living there. Commentators are divided as to the disinterestedness of the patriarch. While it is true that Abraham never mentions his nephew Lot, who at that time was a resident of Sodom, it is hard to accept that the safety of his kin played no part in the altruism of Abraham. During the 'negotiations' of chapter 18, Abraham moves from a theoretical fifty righteous to a theoretical ten, but declines to pursue the course to the logical conclusion: *what if even one righteous man if found?* Perhaps Abraham was not so confident that his nephew would constitute that 'one.' Or perhaps by that time the patriarch had learned a lesson in political versus personal judgment – that the punishment meted out upon cities and nations differs fundamentally from that which awaits each individual human being.

A cursory overview of the chapter gives rise to the question, 'Why did God consider it necessary to bring Abraham in on the divine investigation and judgment upon these wicked cities?' The surface answer, provided in the text itself, is that God had chosen Abraham not only as the individual with whom He would establish His covenant, but also as the father of the covenant people who would come from Abraham. But this answer tells us only of Abraham's right, as it were, to hear that whole story; it does not explain the abiding intention of the Holy Spirit in preserving this narrative for future generations. This answer – or at least a part of it – comes in a twofold manner, each portion related to the person and the gift of prophecy.

A fundamental principle of true prophecy is that what the prophet predicts actually comes to pass. The *locus classicus* for this criteria is in Deuteronomy 18,

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[172] Genesis 13:13

> *When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.* (Deuteronomy 18:22)

The principle is clear enough. But at times the prophecy itself was intentionally so far into the future that there could be no expectation of it coming true within the lifetime of the prophet who spoke the word. In this case, the prophet is often given a more near-term prediction, one that can reasonably be expected to come to pass within the prophet's lifetime, so that the longer term prophecies might be believed. This was the case with the Isaianic prophecies of the Messiah, recorded in Isaiah 7. The most significant prophecy is in regard to the virgin who will be with child – the prophecy of the coming Messiah. But that was yet nine centuries in the future. Hence the word of the Lord to Isaiah also included the overthrow of the kings of Aram and Israel, who were at that time besieging Jerusalem and threatening the throne of King Ahaz of Judah. The nearer term prediction came to pass, authenticating the longer term one.

It appears in Genesis 18 that God holds himself to the same standard. In Chapter 15 the LORD prophesied that the land of Canaan would become the possession of Abraham's descendants, not of Abraham himself. The chronology was dependent on the "*iniquity of the Amorites,*" which had not yet run its course. Abraham would be long gathered to his fathers before the divine judgment would be meted out upon the Amorite inhabitants of the promised land. But there was another people whose cup of wrath was much nearer the brim: the wicked men of Sodom and Gomorrah and their environs. It is reasonable to conclude that God deigned to bring Abraham in on the upcoming investigation, judgment, and destruction of these cities, whose iniquity had reached full measure, in order to strengthen his faith in the terms upon which the land promised to him would become the possession of his remote descendants. In other words, comprehending and witnessing the wrath of God upon the cities of the plain, whose wickedness had ascended to God as a cry, would further

convince Abraham that the clock was ticking on the Amorites as well. It was almost midnight for Sodom and Gomorrah, though only late afternoon for the rest of the Amorites of the land. Still, "when the measure of iniquity was full, no intercession could avert the judgment."[173]

This lesson is one for all believers – indeed, for all mankind, if they would heed it. It is of the same cloth as the apostle Paul's words to the Greek philosophers on Mars Hill,

> *He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us…* (Acts 17:26-27)

This is an abiding comfort to all believers, in every age. Though the destruction of the wicked may not come about in our lifetime, we can rest assured that it will come to pass, when the measure of the iniquity of that land is full. The Judge of all the Earth (18:25) knows what that measure is for each people, and will not be late in delivering the world from the wickedness of that society when its time has come. It remains, of course, for us to consider the fate of the righteous when the wicked are so thoroughly overthrown.

A second reason why God chooses to fully inform Abraham of His plans with regard to Sodom and Gomorrah, is that the patriarch was himself a prophet. The prophetic office was not merely an occasional herald, a newsboy for God, as it were. The prophet became an associate of the Lord in the revelation to be delivered in that prophet's day. This does not mean that everything the prophet spoke was of divine inspiration. One can envision a prophet getting less than a 100% on an exam! What this does mean, however, is that God so ordains the prophetic ministry that the seer is brought into the counsel of God on all matters pertaining to the current revelation.

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[173] Keil & Delitzsch; 230.

Surely the LORD God does nothing unless He reveals His secret counsel to His servants the prophets. (Amos 3:7)

Thus the decision to include Abraham in the counsel of judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah is further confirmation that the patriarch was himself a prophet. This will not be revealed explicitly until Chapter 20, but we find implicit evidence earlier both in the open communication between God and Abraham and in the decision by God to reveal the divine plan for the cities of the plain. God includes His prophets in His plans in order to draw out their own thoughts on the matter, and in the process to instruct them in the ways of the divine mind. In the narrative of Genesis 18, that mind is turned toward judgment, but of a particular kind: *political* judgment rather than *personal* judgment. Abraham confuses the two, as have many, many others throughout the ages, including our own. As usual, the lessons of ancient Canaan are pertinent today. But first, the setting of the narrative.

Now the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. When he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing opposite him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth… **(18:1-2)**

There is, of course, a great deal of discussion in the commentaries about just who these three 'men' are in the opening verses of Genesis 18. The traditional opinion is that one of them is the LORD – a pre-incarnate Christophany – and the other two are angels. However, there are, and have been, other opinions too numerous to even summarize here. It is undeniable that the men, or at times one of the men, are identified with the LORD, as the first verse clearly establishes, "*Now the LORD appears to him by the oaks of Mamre…*" It does complicate matters that we are immediately introduced to *three* men standing opposite Abraham's tent, but that cannot diminish the fact that it was the LORD who was appearing to the patriarch.

The fundamental problem, it would seem, is whether the divine appearance was direct or indirect. Jewish tradition, holding to the immateriality of the divine being, and the impossibility of any man *seeing* God, maintains that these 'men' were angelic beings in whom the presence of the LORD was granted in a powerful, albeit mysterious and inexplicable, manner. Josephus reflects this traditional view in his summary of the passage,

> When God had thus resolved concerning the Sodomites, Abraham, as he sat by the oak of Mambre, at the door of his tent, saw three angels; and thinking them to be strangers, he rose up, and saluted them, and desired they would accept of an entertainment, and abide with him; to which, when they agreed, he ordered cakes of meal to be made presently; and when he had slain a calf, he roasted it, and brought it to them, as they sat under the oak. Now they made a show of eating; and besides, they asked him about his wife Sarah, where she was; and when he said she was within, they said they would come again hereafter, and find her become a mother. Upon which the woman laughed, and said that it was impossible she should bear children, since she was ninety years of age, and her husband was a hundred. **Then they concealed themselves no longer, but declared that they were angels of God**; and that one of them was sent to inform them about the child, and two of the overthrow of Sodom.[174]

But Josephus immediately struggles with the text itself, as it is clear from the narrative that Abraham attempts to intercede on behalf of Sodom, not with an angel, but with God himself. This Josephus acknowledges, and seems to make the traditional Christian distinction between one of the 'men' and the other two,

> When Abraham heard this, he was grieved for the Sodomites; and he rose up, and **besought God for them**, and entreated him that he would not destroy the righteous with the wicked. And when **God had replied** that there was no good man among the Sodomites; for if there were but ten such man among them, he would not punish any of them for their sins, Abraham held his peace. And the angels came to the city of the Sodomites…[175]

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[174] Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*; http://www.biblestudytools.com/history/flavius-josephus/antiquities-jews/book-1/chapter-11.html
[175] *Idem.*

It appears that the writer to the Hebrews may have held the traditional Jewish view, however, as his apparent allusion to this narrative makes no mention of Abraham having discourse with the LORD, but rather that through his hospitality, the patriarch *"entertained angels without knowing…"*[176] No less a scholar than John Calvin concluded that the presence of the Lord was in all three 'men,' alluding perhaps to the Trinity though he does not explicitly stating that. Calvin writes, "The reason why Moses introduces, at one time, three speakers, while, at another, he ascribes speech to one only, is, that the three together represent the person of the one God."[177]

John Calvin (1509-64)

Calvin's view notwithstanding, the text seems to leave us in no doubt that one of the 'men' is the LORD, for He speaks *as the LORD* in several verses (i.e., 18:13 and 18:17). In the next chapter, which chronicles the destruction of the cities, the two 'men' are referred to as angels, and neither of them speaks at any time as the LORD. Thus we conclude, as the church has done consistently down through the ages, that one of the visitors was the LORD himself, while the other two were ministering angels whose mission was to investigate the iniquity of Sodom and Gomorrah, and to execute the Lord's wrath upon those cities. Andrew Fuller adopts the traditional Christian view, that the 'man' who was himself the LORD was the pre-incarnate manifestation of the Second Person of the Godhead, the *Logos* of God who would one day take on human flesh in reality, and not merely in appearance. "The Divine personage who in this manner appeared to men must surely have been no other than the Son of God,

[176] Hebrews 13:1
[177] Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*; 472.

who thus occasionally assumed the form of that nature which it was his intention, in the fullness of time, actually to take upon him."[178]

...and [Abraham] said, "My Lord, if now I have found favor in Your sight, please do not pass Your servant by. Please let a little water be brought and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree; and I will bring a piece of bread, that you may refresh yourselves; after that you may go on, since you have visited your servant." And they said, "So do, as you have said." **(18:3-5)**

A subtle change in the form of Abraham's greeting, *Lord*, in this section versus after the 'men' ask of Sarah, indicates that at this early point in the event the patriarch was not aware of the divine nature of his guest(s). Here we see Ancient Near Eastern hospitality at work. In a land and an age where there were no inns, travelers were vulnerable to bandits, especially after the sun set. The standard practice was for inhabitants of the nearest village to offer shelter and food for travelers. The terminology of a stranger finding hospitality in this manner was 'coming under the shadow' of the home (tent) owner like Abraham. This courtesy was expected even towards one's enemy, if the latter were able to reach close enough to one's abode to 'take hold of the tent peg.' At which point the owner of the tent would treat the guest in an honored manner, tending to his every need before tending to his own. Hospitality was the warp and woof of the social fabric of that era and region, and "no disgrace was ever more detestable than to be called inhospitable."[179]

In this event it was not evening, but sometime in the afternoon when the heat was most unbearable. The text informs us that for this reason Abraham was at the entrance of his tent, no doubt catching what little breeze might be on the wind, when he sees the three men. He is most humble in his entreaty – perhaps the men had some outward appearance of the dignity they bore incognito – though the spread he intended to place before them was a veritable feast. As far as we can tell from the text, however, Abraham did not suspect the true identity

[178] Fuller; 74.
[179] Calvin; 469.

of these men until one of them made the promise of a son, and subsequently heard Sarah laughing in her heart. At that point Abraham switches from a very common form of the title *adoni* – 'my lord' - to the more singular *adonai*, which all but universally refers to the Divine LORD.

The purpose of this visit is, apparently, to test Sarah's faith and not just Abraham's hospitality. The discussion between the 'men' as to informing Abraham of the other purpose of the trip seems to be almost an afterthought; though we know that there is no afterthought with God. What is of primary importance in this first part of Chapter 18, however, is bringing Abraham's wife to that measure of faith without which it would be impossible for her to please God, and, according to the writer of Hebrews, also impossible for her to conceive the promised son (*cp*. Heb. 11:11). Thus far Sarah's knowledge of the promise was, like Eve's knowledge of the commandment given to Adam, second hand only. Was her heart unwavering in faith as the heart of her husband? Not yet.

> Though Abraham had, doubtless, imparted to her the wondrous intelligence he had received, she seems to have remained skeptical to the possibility of an event so unprecedented as that a wife at her advanced age should become a mother; and so obdurate was her incredulity that a direct assurance from the Diving Promiser was necessary to convince her of the truth.[180]

Then they said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "There, in the tent." He said, "I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door, which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; Sarah was past childbearing. Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?" **(18:9-12)**

Abraham might well have been astonished by the question, *"Where is Sarah your wife?"* on two accounts. First, that the men would know that his wife's name was 'Sarah' at all is unusual (even more so that they knew her name was not 'Sarai,' which until very recently it had been). Secondly, it would be odd for strangers to even ask after the host's wife – it was to be expected that she was in

[180] Jamieson, Faussett, and Brown; 155.

the tent 'where she belonged,' and not in sight of strangers. But of course the Lord knew right where Sarah was, and it probably was not exactly where Abraham thought she would be. In the typical tent of the Bedouin there was a separation screen between the wife's quarters and those of the husband. The husband entertained in the front portion, but no man other than a husband or son, or eunuch, would be allowed to pass through that screen. And, normally, the wife would not come forward through the screen unless bidden by her husband. It appears that Sarah was, as Samwise Gamgee put it, 'dropping eaves.' She was listening in on the conversation, and undoubtedly the Lord knew this.

This forwardness of Sarah served the Lord's purposes, though. It enabled Him to reiterate the promise of a son in her hearing, without the uncomfortable situation of a wife being called before total strangers. It also allowed her to act un-self-consciously in response, as she did not know that her presence was known. It revealed to the Lord what He already knew, and to Sarah what she did not know: that she was still in unbelief. Her laughter brought forth a rebuke from the Lord; Abraham's laughter earlier did not. "For Sarah is not transported with admiration and joy, on receiving the promise of God; but foolishly sets her own age and that of her husband in opposition to the word of God; that she may withhold confidence from God, when he speaks."[181]

But it was not just Sarah and Abraham's advanced age that troubled Sarah, for it appears from the subsequent narrative that she was still very beautiful, and we know from the rest of the Abrahamic narrative that he was still able to sire offspring. No, it seems that our earlier conjecture that Sarah may have already undergone menopause finds support in the phrasing of verse 11. Whereas the New American Standard tells us that she was past childbearing, the Hebrew text is perhaps more delicately and accurately translated by the King James, "*and it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.*" The 'manner

[181] Calvin; 474.

of women' is a typical biblical euphemism for the menstrual cycle (*cp.* Genesis 31:35, where Jacob's wife Rachel pleads 'the manner of women' to her father Laban, in order to secure the stolen idols she had taken from his home).

Apart from faith, this physical 'reality' was more than Sarah could overcome so as to embrace the promise that she would bear Abraham a son. Her laughter was of scorn, and her comment bitter, as if she considered this 'man' to be mocking her in her misery. But the 'man' quickly showed His true identity by rebuking Sarah for her secret laughter (albeit not to Sarah directly, but to Abraham, as was proper). At this point Sarah boldly enters the conversation, though foolishly denying that she had laughed. The Lord's retort was powerfully succinct – in a year's time you will have a son…and, yes, you did laugh.

The narrative picked up a new theme back in Chapter 17 and carries it through Chapter 18: the thus far un-encountered verb 'to laugh.' Abraham laughs in the previous chapter; Sarah laughs in this one. Abraham's laughter drew no rebuke from the Lord, as it apparently flowed from joy stimulated from the sheer magnitude of the promise. Sarah's was a laugh of unbelief, which was immediately corrected by God: *"Is anything to wonderful for the Lord?"* – that is the literal translation of the word rendered 'difficult' by the NASB, *wonderful*. But the repeated use of the word, while accurately reflecting the reactions of Abraham and Sarah, have the deeper meaning of alluding to the divinely-given name of the promised son. 'To laugh,' in Hebrew, is formed by the same letters (צחק) as those that make up the name, 'Isaac.' The name of the promised son would be a daily reminder that it is the Lord who *"makes foolish the wisdom of the wise...and calls into being that which is not."* Songwriter Michael Card found in this narrative the lyrics of a popular contemporary song, *They Called Him Laughter*, the chorus of which is as follows:

They called him laughter, for he came after,
The Father had made an impossible promise come true.
The birth of a baby to a hopeless old lady,
So they called him laughter, cause no other name would do.

Then the men rose up from there, and looked down toward Sodom; and Abraham was walking with them to send them off. The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed? For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him." **(18:16-19)**

The purpose of the visit – the ultimate purpose – now comes to the front of the narrative. Here we learn that the three 'men' who visited Abraham in his tent, were on their way (or at least two of them were) to investigate the cry of retribution that had been ascending to heaven from the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. We have already discussed the biblical explanation for why God brings Abraham into His counsel with regard to Sodom and its judgment. Now we will ourselves investigate the patriarch's reaction to the news. Unlike many today, and perhaps many of us as well, Abraham did not rejoice when he heard that the habitation of the wicked would be utterly destroyed. This is not, of course, because Abraham desired anything for the wicked but what their deeds justly deserved. It was, rather, because in the charity of his heart he envisioned there being in Sodom some righteous folk who would be, in his mind, unjustly caught up in the destruction. John Calvin writes,

> Moreover, the humanity of Abraham appears also in this, that although he knows Sodom to be filled with vilest corruption, he cannot bring his mind to think that all are infected with the contagion of wickedness; but he rather inclines to the equitable supposition, that, in so great a multitude, some just persons may be concealed. For this is a horrible prodigy, that the filth of iniquity should so pervade the whole body, as to allow no member to remain pure.[182]

[182] Calvin; 490.

Abraham was to be disappointed in his supposition; there were not enough righteous souls in Sodom (if there were, indeed, any) to save the city. But this is likely the very lesson that the Lord intended for Abraham to learn, and the reason why He allowed the discourse to continue through six iterations of 'theoreticals' put forward by the patriarch. Moving from the possibility of fifty righteous being found, to the chance that perhaps ten such might be located within the city, Abraham receives successive commitments from the Lord that the city would be spared on each account. In the end, of course, not even ten righteous men could be discovered in the city of Sodom, and we may assume that none were present to contribute to the tally from Gomorrah or the other, smaller cities of the region.

And the LORD said, "The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know." **(18:20-12)**

Before we delve into the dialogue between Abraham and God in regard to the judgment impending upon Sodom, we encounter this remarkable statement by the Lord, to the effect that He has come to *investigate* the report of Sodom's wickedness, to see if it really is as bad as He has heard. Such a representation of the Divine Knowledge seems contrary to Omniscience, and also to portray the Creator of all things as being remote and unaware of what was happening on His earth. This view of God suits the opinions of many philosophers, and certainly all agnostics, of every age of human history, but it does not fit with the self-disclosure of God that we have in Scripture. He who knows the end from the beginning, and who established the times and boundaries of every nation, is not One who could be unaware of the wickedness of Sodom. It must be that the language presented here is meant to teach something other than divine ignorance, or the need for God to 'investigate' something in the same manner as a human judge.

Similar language is used of the divine view of mankind just before the Deluge,

> *Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.*
>
> (Genesis 6:5-6)

The language in each case signifies a situation in which God has left man, as it were, to his own devices. Biblically, this is referred to as "*given over to a reprobate heart (or mind),*" and it is a form of judgment that comes when the path of wickedness has been trod far along its full length. It is not final judgment, but it is frequently a point of no return, at which point the conscience is seared (literally, *cauterized*). God, who is both Omniscience and Omnipresent, does not depart from His creation into a state of ignorance of the affairs of mankind. Yet He does, in a manner of speaking, remove Himself from man in terms of that common grace that helps delay the corruption due to sin. When this stay is removed, man descends rapidly into abject wickedness – he fills the full measure of the cup of wrath that is in store for him.

This state of 'distance' that God establishes between the unrighteous and the knowledge of Him, is manifested in *practical atheism* – when the fool says in his heart, "*There is no God.*" This is the latter stage of inveterate sin, and a sign of judgment to come. Apparently Sodom and Gomorrah had been abandoned to this degenerative fate long before – certainly before Lot chose to dwell there – and successive generations of Sodomites grew only more evil in their thoughts and deeds. Their knowledge of God in any form, and the consequent moral framework that sustains any human society, had long since eroded into atheism.

> For the men of Sodom go on, as if they had nothing to do with God; their sense of good and evil being extinguished, they wallow like cattle in every kind of filth;

> and just as if they should never have to render an account of their conduct, they flatter themselves in their vices.[183]

This is a condition into which human society descends by parts, almost imperceptibly until the very pits have been reached. But by then there is no moral consciousness left that would tell that society that it had descended into the pits of wickedness, and now is facing divine judgment. Rather human society considers itself to be scaling the mountains of progress and civilization at the very same time it is degrading into abject evil and atheism. This is the anesthetizing effect of reprobation.

> The men of Sodom did not fall at once into such execrable wickedness; but that, in the beginning, luxury from the fullness of bread prevailed, and that, afterwards, pride and cruelty followed. At length, when they were given up to a reprobate mind, they were also driven headlong into brutal lusts.[184]

It is because of this apparent abandonment by God of a society to the reprobation of its unbelief and sin, that He is now portrayed as coming down 'to investigate' the cry rising up to heaven on account of that sin. He has 'gone away' in terms of withholding that common grace that had at one time restrained human sin, and offered a natural religion to the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. Now He 'returns' to see to the end result of their reprobation – an end of which He was fully aware – and to render just retribution for their collective sin. The 'cry' of which the Lord speaks may be that of the innocent who once lived, and suffered and died, in the midst of the ungodly inhabitants of Sodom. Or it may be Creation itself, which groans under the abuse of humanity. In either case, God now reveals Himself as a just Judge who investigates the claims against the defendants before issuing His verdict. There is, however, no doubt in the reader's mind what that verdict will be.

Abraham, however, is not initially in agreement with the verdict.

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[183] Calvin; 484.
[184] *Ibid.*; 491.

Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before the LORD. Abraham came near and said, "Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will You indeed sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" **(18:22-25)**

This section, the dialogue between Abraham and God, is the portion of this chapter that has the most abiding ethical implication for believers today. The patriarch here questions the *justice* of the Divine Judge. That in itself is significant, but it is really nothing more than all men have done in all ages; Abraham is simply honest enough to express his concerns, "*Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?*" This statement carries the strong implication that by destroying an entire city, when there may be a remnant of the godly within that city, is not just. Frankly, there is simply no other way to read Abraham's comment.

Yet God indulges his friend in this 'argument,' for it presents an opportunity for Him to instruct the one who will be the father (and hence the original judge) of the people of God, "*For I have chosen him in order that he may command his children and his household after him…*" Justice was to be the unique characteristic of the people of God, and it was to start with Abraham, the founder of that people. But Abraham's understanding of divine justice – which is not essentially different from true human justice – was deficient. The patriarch confused *personal* judgment with *political* judgment; it was time for God to instruct him in the right way.

Abraham argues as many men have argued: the destruction of the wicked, though a great multitude, is not worth the loss of even a few righteous. The loss of ten righteous people is, to Abraham, too high a price to pay that justice might be meted out upon the multitude whose evil had risen as a stench before God. It is important to note that Abraham is *not* arguing that the wicked should escape punishment, but rather that this punishment should be held in abeyance so long

as a remnant of the righteous remains in the midst of the wicked. Leon Kass writes, "he is not at all arguing that the wicked be spared out of mercy or compassion, only that the righteous not suffer with the guilty."[185] This is to focus on *personal* judgment – the just desserts of each individual man (and woman, of course) – and to ignore the reality of *political* justice – the necessary retribution meted out during the course of history against whole societies on account of the accumulated wickedness of that people.

We often hear of 'innocents' being harmed or killed in the collateral damage associated inevitably with warfare. But from a biblical point of view, 'innocent' is not a term that can describe any man born of natural descent from Adam. What we mean, of course, is that the victims were not direct combatants; they were not part of the conflict, though they suffered on account of it. This is the same notion that Abraham is pursuing here: the *righteous* in Sodom (and he is sure there are at least some who fit that bill) must not be allowed to suffer while the wicked receive their due. But this is to flip matters on their head, and to argue that the wicked might prosper on account of the presence of the righteous, rather than the righteous suffer on account of the sin of the wicked.

> Abraham is so concerned over the fate of the righteous and innocent that he is willing to let the wicked escape their fitting punishment; in effect, he is asking that the wicked prosper as the righteous. Thus, Abraham's preoccupation with securing justice for the righteous leads him to defend injustice, treating the wicked the same as the righteous.[186]

In the end it appears that Abraham's argument was moot. There were not even ten righteous people in Sodom (and God undoubtedly knew this), and the one who was at least relatively righteous, Abraham's nephew Lot, would be delivered from the city even as it was being destroyed. But why did God acquiesce to the successive limitations placed by Abraham on Divine Justice with

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[185] Kass; 322.
[186] *Ibid.*; 323.

regard to Sodom? From a theoretical fifty righteous down to just ten supposed godly folk in the city, God allows that He would spare the city if such a number could be found therein. Some see in this discourse the power of prayer in affecting the mind of God. But this is a dangerous tack, as it results in a malleable God whose purposes can be altered by, dare we say it, a man who is more compassionate than He? Anyone who allows the Scripture to speak as to the nature of the Divine Being will not follow this course; Abraham's entreaties are not a lesson on 'persistent prayer.'

They are, however, an abiding lesson on justice. We are not told why Abraham broke off his entreaties at ten, but it is not unreasonable to conclude that, in the subtle manner in which He always does these things, God had taught Abraham the lesson intended. God's just wrath upon Sodom and Gomorrah and the associated cities, manifests the historical truth that the collective sin of mankind bears a different sort of judgment than that of the individual, due to the fact that the collective sin is more dangerous to the stability of God's Creation. "[Abraham] comes to see that to care about justice for a whole city or a whole nation means that one must be willing to overlook, at least to some extent, both the natural preferences for one's own kin and the demand for absolutely strict justice for each individual."[187] Divine judgment in the political sphere is not like the 'neutron bomb' – the righteous are not left standing while the wicked are laid low. Daniel and his friends were deported to Babylon, Jeremiah dragged off to Egypt, and countless of God's people have perished in the wars of the wicked. The justice of God to the individual will stand unimpaired at the end, wherein each man will be rewarded on his own basis and not that of the collective of which he was a part. But in this world, fallen and weighed down as it is under the burden of sin, collective judgment often occurs, with the righteous caught upon alongside the wicked. It is a tough lesson to learn.

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[187] *Ibid.*; 324.

Week 12: **The Destruction of Sodom**

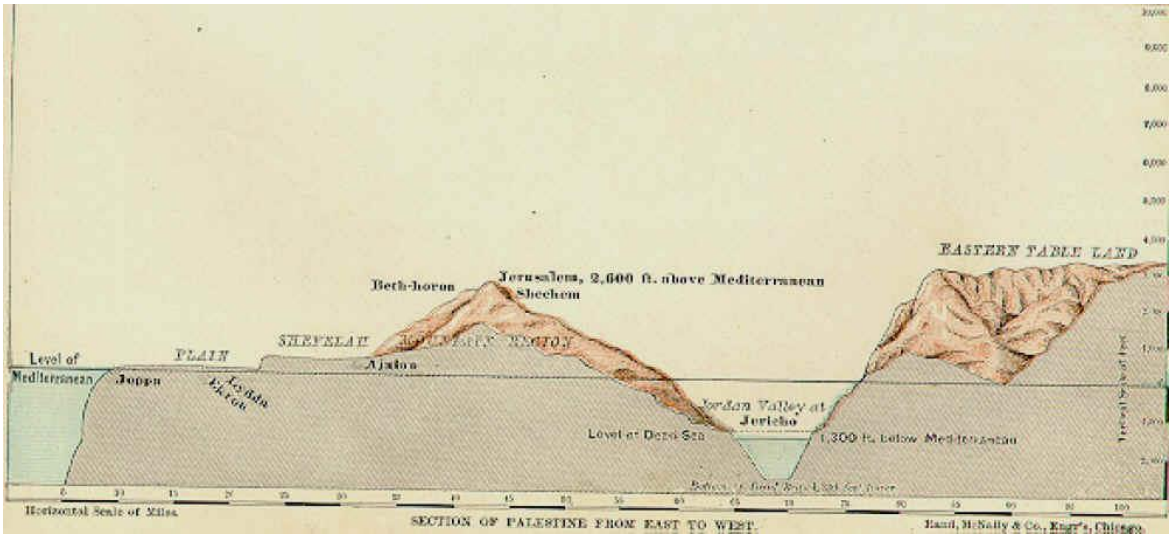
Text Reading: **Genesis 19:1 - 38**

"In reality the visit of the men of God only revealed the ambiguity in which Lot had lived the whole time."
(Gerhard von Rad)

The story of the destruction of the Cities of the Plain – with Sodom as the primary metropolis – is another place in the Bible where revelation and science intersect. Similar to the Flood narrative, the record of events found in Genesis 19 speak of something that occurred *in history*, resulting in the complete destruction of a significant human civilization some time in the early Bronze Age (*c.* early Second Century BC). Skeptics, of course, have discounted the biblical narrative as myth and legend, denying the existence of the five cities of the Jordan Plain – only four of which were ultimately destroyed by the wrath of God. We can certainly admit that the story of the sudden destruction of four ancient cities in the space of just a few hours is, *prima facie*, somewhat remarkable. But we must also allow that even legend originates within history, and myth takes as its formative materials the events of dim antiquity. Thus biblical literature intersects with the sciences of archaeology and of geology, and scholars for the past two centuries have labored to prove, or disprove, the biblical record.

By all accounts the Cities of the Plain were located toward the southern section of the Dead (or Salt) Sea, the final outlet of the Jordan River from which there is no other exit. The Dead Sea itself is a remarkable geographical, and geological, anomaly in the earth. The surface of the Sea is approximately 1,300 feet below the level of the Mediterranean Sea, making it the lowest declivity on the planet. But what is even more remarkable to the geologist is the incredible depth of the Dead Sea, whose northern

portion dips to a further 1,200 – 1,400 feet. Into this basin the Jordan River courses from it source north of the Sea of Galilee. But there is no further outlet from the Dead Sea, which fact causes a dramatic increase in the salinity of the sea due to evaporation, resulting in a body of water completely inhospitable to most marine and land life. Could this region have ever supported human society? Could it be imagined that the valley south of this barren lake was once, *"like the garden of the LORD"*? By the turn of the 20th Century, liberal scholars and secular archaeologists alike were discounting the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah as mythological, with no foundation in history.



The science of Geology was born in the 19th Century, and was quite young when the preeminent archaeologist of the lands of the Bible, William F. Albright, pronounced Sodom and Gomorrah to be myths. However, had Albright (who eventually came around to acknowledging the existence and the destruction of the Cities of the Plain) had the benefit of the science of plate tectonics, he might have erred on the side of belief rather than disbelief. It turns out that the Jordan River and the Dead Sea lie directly along one of the major plate boundaries of the earth,

William Albright (1891-1971)

known as the Jordan Rift. This is the intersection of the continental plate of Africa and the sub-continental Arabian Plate, which are constantly both running parallel to one another and, at places like the Dead Sea, moving away from each other (known as the Dead Sea Transform). This sort of tectonic activity is highly conducive to earthquakes and volcanoes, as well as the development of volcanic compounds such as bitumen, pitch, and sulfur – all of which have been discovered in abundance both around and within the Dead Sea.

> The Dead Sea sits in what is referred to as the Jordan Valley rift system. The west side of the valley is part of the African plate and the east side is part of the Arabian plate. These two plates are sliding past each other, and in a few places they are also pulling apart from one another. The result of this sliding and pulling is a rift valley. As the plates have pulled apart, the area between the plates has subsided resulting in a sediment filled crack well below sea surface. This part of the Middle East is literally being ripped and torn apart geologically. This process occurs much slower than the political upheaval that we see in the region, but it nonetheless has sculpted this region over millennia and has produced many of the geographical characteristics that we associate with the Promised Land, as recorded in the Bible, such as the Judean Mountains, Dead Sea, Jordan River, and the Wilderness of Judea.[188]

From a purely geological standpoint, then, the complete disappearance of an entire island, a large city, or a large portion of landmass is well within the experience of the earth, as sudden releases of tectonic energy often subduct large portions of the surface dozens or even scores of feet below their original elevation. In addition, powerful earthquakes produce liquefaction of the soil, with very quickly turns a large area of landmass into quicksand, causing anything and everything built upon it to sink below its surface very suddenly. This may very well have been the fate of the legendary Atlantis, perhaps an ancient Greek island city-state that succumbed very quickly to a massive earthquake.

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[188] https://thenaturalhistorian.com/2014/09/06/origins-of-the-dead-sea-part-iii-the-levant-a-land-literally-torn-apart/

But the Bible tells us that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed not by an earthquake, but by 'fire and brimstone.' This description has often been interpreted as the result of a volcanic eruption, but geological investigations have indicated no such activity in the Dead Sea region for millennia. However, geologists have shown that all plate boundaries have molten activity beneath them, even if there is no 'volcano' from which the magma escapes. Thus it has been reasonably theorized by secular as well as biblical scholars, that the events recorded in Genesis 19 were indeed as they are related in the text. 'Brimstone' is a sulfur compound common to active earthquake zones, and very common in the region of the Dead Sea. Bitumen is a form of coal, also the result of magma flows and plate pressure in highly active zones like the Jordan Rift and the Dead Sea Transform. The archaeological record proves that both sulfur compounds and bitumen (pitch) were not only prevalent in this area of the world, but were a marketable resource for the people who lived there. The mineral products of this tectonically active region were very valuable to the Egyptians, being used in cosmetics and embalming.

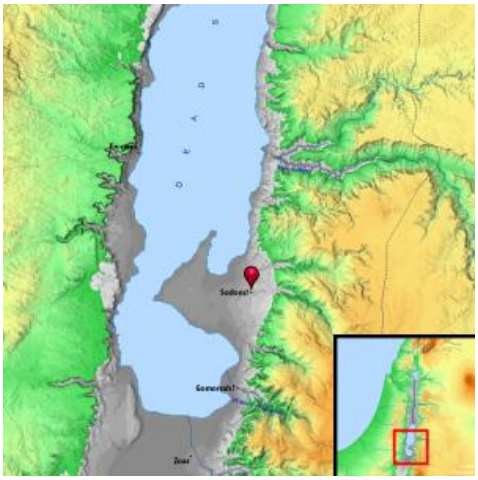
So what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim? The short answer is that God in His righteous indignation toward their inveterate wickedness, utterly destroyed these four cities without trace. The longer answer may be that a massive earthquake – the timing and location of which was determined by the providential will of God (*cp.* Amos 3:6) – not only subducted and liquefied the plains on which these cities were located, but also released huge amounts of sulfurous and hydrocarbon gases, which the magma also released by the earthquake ignited, creating a huge fireball and conflagration that consumed the cities. Still, the geological possibility of a cataclysmic event does not mean that there was any civilization on location to destroy. What evidence do we have that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah ever existed?

As noted above, William F. Albright, considered to be the dean of biblical archaeology, publically and prolifically doubted the historical veracity of the

Sodom and Gomorrah narratives. However, in the 1920s a team of archaeologists led by another renown archaeologist, Nelson Glueck, discovered a ancient highway that linked Babylon with the Dead Sea region, raising the possibility that there was once a trade route linking the well-known civilization in the East to the as-yet-unknown civilization in the Jordan Plain. Subsequent excavations in the 1960s yielded an ancient burial ground as well as substantial evidence of both human dwellings and industry. Eventually even Albright admitted that the biblical stories of Sodom and Gomorrah were plausible, even probable. But it remains true that no significant metropolis area has been unearthed, and Sodom and Gomorrah remain essentially lost.

Nelson Glueck (1900-71)

The geology described above does explain the complete loss of a city or cities in close proximity, but there is another piece of the puzzle that may help modern scholars in 'locating' the ancients Cities of the Plain. Sonic mapping of the Jordan River Valley and the Dead Sea, done in the mid-20th Century, yielded a remarkable configuration of the Dead Sea itself. Known to be incredibly deep at its northern side, ranging from 1,200 to 1,600 feet, the sea was found to be barely 13 feet in average depth across a large portion of its southern end. This indicates that the southern portion of the sea is not as 'old' as the northern portion, having been submerged much later in the geologic history of the Dead Sea. This phenomenon fits well with the theory of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim having been due to tectonic subduction – the rapid lowering of a large portion of the earth – as well as liquefaction. The northern part of the sea would



naturally have flown over into the newly depressed portion that once supported the Cities of the Plain. Along with more modern evidence that supports liquefaction at the time of the biblical narrative, the shallow depth of the southern end of the Dead Sea points to this being the region in which the ancient, wicked cities once stood proud. Werner Keller quotes the American biblical scholar and professor of archaeology, Jack Finegan, in summary:

> Probably it was about 1900 BC that the catastrophic destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah too place. A careful examination of the literary, geological, and archaeological evidence leads to the conclusion that the corrupt 'cities of the plain' lay in the area which is now submerged beneath the slowly rising waters of the southern section of the Dead Sea, and that their destruction came about through a great earthquake which was probably accompanied by explosions, lightning, issue of natural gas and general conflagration.[189]

None of these comments may be taken to diminish the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as an act of judgment from a holy God against a wicked habitation of man. These introductory comments merely serve to show, once again, that the biblical record is not 'un-scientific,' though it never purports to be a lesson book on either geology or archaeology. These modern sciences do, however, consistently discover supporting evidence for the biblical record, which serves in turn to validate and strengthen the faith of the believer in the Word of God. Yet that believer knows the story of Sodom and Gomorrah to be one of *ethical,* and not *geological* import – it is the narrative of divine wrath, and is itself a 'mini Flood Narrative,' being a foretaste of that fate for which the entire sinful world is held in reserve.

> *Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation." For when they maintain this, it escapes their notice that by the word of God the heavens existed long ago and the earth was formed out of water and by water, through*

[189] Keller, *The Bible as History*; 81.

> *which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water. But by His word* ***the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire****, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men… But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and* ***the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.***
>
> (II Peter 3:3-7; 10)

Now the two angels came to Sodom in the evening as Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. And he said, "Now behold, my lords, please turn aside into your servant's house, and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you may rise early and go on your way." **(19:1-2)**

While one of the heavenly visitors – we believe the pre-incarnate Christ – remained behind to talk with Abraham, the other two journeyed on to Sodom. Their spiritual nature is manifested in that they arrive in Sodom in the evening of the same day on which they rested and dined with Abraham, though the distance from Hebron to the area south of Dead Sea is at least a two-day's journey. When the 'men' arrive in Sodom, they find Lot sitting in the gate of the city, where the city elders and leading men traditionally met to discuss civic events and to adjudicate city matters. Lot, it appears, had been living within the walls of the city long enough to have become a regular fixture in the gates – though that does not mean he was accepted as an equal by the inhabitants of Sodom. We will learn soon enough that Lot's own assessment of his pull with the dwellers of the city was quite different than that of the natives, who hold a deep-seated resentment toward this 'foreigner.'

The parallel between the opening verses of Chapter 19 and those of Chapter 18 are clear to see: strangers arrive in the presence of Lot (19) and Abraham (18), and these men each offer the traditional and cultural hospitality due to travelers in the Ancient Near East. Undoubtedly Moses intends for us to see the similarity between Lot and his uncle in this regard, for soon he will inform us of the differences. The response of the two 'men' to Lot is striking when compared to the answer given by the three 'men' to Abraham upon the latter's offer of hospitality. There the men replied, *"Do as you have said,"* but here

the two 'men' answer Lot by rejecting his offer of hospitality and lodging, intending instead to sleep in the city square. There are numerous conjectural explanations for this response: perhaps the 'men' had no desire to spend so much as a night in the home of any inhabitant of a city so wicked as Sodom. But it is hard to imagine that these heavenly beings did not know Lot, and his relationship to Abraham. So perhaps this was a test by the 'men' of Lot himself, to see the man's true nature with regard to hospitality and the protection of aliens. In any event, Lot does prevail upon them and they enter his home for a meal.

At this point we must step back and take a panoramic view of the whole narrative, in order to attempt an answer to the perennial and vexing question regarding whether Lot was a 'righteous' man. From the furthest remove, we have two data points. The first is that God did rescue Lot from the destruction that befell Sodom – that must count for something. The second data point is that enigmatic passage in II Peter, which we investigated in an earlier lesson,

> *…and if He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly lives thereafter; and if He rescued righteous Lot, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men (for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day by their lawless deeds)…*
>
> (II Peter 2:6-8)

To the first point we may respond that, while God did indeed rescue Lot, the overall narrative does not portray Abraham's nephew in a very good light. Commentators have attempted throughout the ages to square the circle, and to somehow harmonize Peter's assessment of Lot with the narrative of Genesis 19. Some imaginative interpretations have been offered that either make Lot look worse than the text portrays him, or attempts to make him look better than a natural reading of the story will allow. But the text itself provides us with the justification of Lot's deliverance from the burning city, "*Thus it came about, when*

God destroyed the cities of the valley, ***that God remembered Abraham****, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot lived."* (19:29) Thus it was for Abraham's sake that God delivered Lot. It is generally assumed that the uncle prayed for the nephew, though we have no evidence of this. Indeed, it was noteworthy in Chapter 18 that throughout his interview with God, Abraham makes no mention whatsoever of his nephew, whom he undoubtedly knew was now residing within the city walls of Sodom. Comments like the following, though common enough in the writings, are completely without foundation in the biblical text: "…we can easily understand that Abraham is bargaining for his nephew's life."[190] It is more reasonable to conclude that Lot's relationship to Abraham was sufficient for God to show mercy on him and to rescue him from the impending catastrophe.

But we still have Peter's words to wrestle with, before we delve into the actual narrative of Lot's behavior as recorded in Genesis 19. Perhaps most important to note, again, is that the term 'righteous' does not have to contain the absolute fullness of its meaning in each and every use. Quite simply, and in keeping with what Peter actually writes, Lot was righteous in that he was not only not guilty of the sins of the Sodomites, but their sins *"vexed his soul."* That comes out in the Genesis 19 narrative, as Lot pleads with his neighbors (whom he calls 'brothers') not to do that which they had planned – sodomy - a heinous sin against man and God. But Lot's behavior as a whole, while it in no way indicts him along with the rest of Sodom, does indeed vindicate the apostle Paul's admonition, *"Bad company corrupts good morals."* The wickedness of Sodom may have vexed Lot's soul, but he was there of his own volition, *and he ought not have been there at all*. Thus his own ethical and moral situation was one of great ambiguity, and when the crisis came he did not know what to do. Thus

[190] George Athos, "Has Lot Lost the Plot? Detail Omission and a Reconsideration of Genesis 19," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*; Volume 16, Article 5; 9.

Gerhard von Rad appropriately comments, "In reality the visit of the men of God only revealed the ambiguity in which he had lived the whole time."[191]

Before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, surrounded the house, both young and old, all the people from every quarter; and they called to Lot and said to him, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may have relations with them." **(19:4-5)**

The NASB gives us an example of how translations often (always) contain more or less interpretation along with their renderings of the original languages into the translation. The NASB translators made the very common interpretation that the Hebrew word 'know' here in verse 5, means to 'know carnally, to have sex.' Thus they translate the clause in verse 5 as "*so that we may have relations with them.*" This is natural enough, as it has traditionally been viewed that illicit sexual rape was the intention of the Sodomites (which word, of course, stands in our language for what it is assumed the men of Sodom wished to do to the 'men' in Lot's house). Remarkably, there are commentators who seek to mitigate the wickedness of the intent of the inhabitants of Sodom (and we should note that the entire city came to besiege Lot's house). Even John Calvin surmises that Lot may have been jumping to conclusions in his assumption of what his neighbors intentions were.

Calvin and others theorize that, initially at least, the men of Sodom were justifiably concerned that Lot may have introduced spies into the city. We do remember that Sodom had been invaded in recent memory, and even Lot himself was carried off prisoner. Thus Calvin writes, "For, as if Lot had been guilty of a fault in admitting unknown men into the city, wherein he himself was a stranger, they command these men to be brought out before them."[192] Some modern commentators go so far as to state that Lot misunderstood his neighbor's intention throughout, and this is what caused them to be so angry! Moses'

[191] Von Rad; 219. Von Rad is actually quoting Hellmut Frey.
[192] Calvin; 497.

narrative, however, leaves no room for such wild conjecture;[193] we are being made aware of the dark hue of the sins of this wicked city, and Lot was well aware of what the men of Sodom intended with his houseguests.

But Lot went out to them at the doorway, and shut the door behind him, and said, "Please, my brothers, do not act wickedly. Now behold, I have two daughters who have not had relations with man; please let me bring them out to you, and do to them whatever you like; only do nothing to these men, inasmuch as they have come under the shelter of my roof." **(19:6-8)**

In three short verses Lot's reputation is exalted and destroyed. Bravely he goes out to face the maddened crowd, to plead with them not to commit the act of wickedness they had purposed. Eastern cultural norms were at stake here, for the 'men' had *"come under the shadow"* of Lot's roof. They were his charge, and it is evident from extra biblical writings that a host was responsible to drive away any and all who would harm his guests. But Lot's offered solution reveals just what a moral quagmire he had gotten himself into by dwelling in the midst of Sodom. Commentators have almost universally attempted to lesson the striking impact of Lot's offering his daughters to satisfy the sexual predations of the men of Sodom, but reasoning that Lot was doing whatever he could to keep faith with his guests. Calvin writes in a manner typical of so many, "As the constancy of Lot, in risking his own life for the defence [*sic*] of his guests, deserves no common praise; so now Moses relates that a defect was mixed with this great virtue, which sprinkled it with some imperfection."[194] Offering one's daughters to a vicious and most likely deadly gang rape, *a defect*? Abandoning the father's natural role as protector of his children, *some imperfection*? Even Calvin immediately recoils from the mildness of his own words, following with, "But he should rather have endured a thousand deaths, than have resorted to such a

[193] As an illustration of just how far afield scholars can go from the text, one commentator views Lot's offer to the men to 'wash their feet' as euphemistic for sexual intercourse – Lot was offering the men carnal pleasures in his home. But this same author denies that the desire of the men of Sodom was to 'know' Lot's guests in a carnal manner, even though the Hebrew word 'know' is very frequently used in this manner. Such an interpretation makes Lot more wicked than the Sodomites!

[194] Calvin; 499.

measure."[195] George Athas denies that an excuse may be found for Lot in the cultural milieu of hospitality,

> However, even within a collectivist ancient society, we must distinguish between personal sacrifice for the sake of hospitality to a stranger, and the obligation one has toward kin, especially to protect and ensure the wellbeing of one's children.[196]

The best that can be said of Lot at this point is that he was a man in utter mental and moral turmoil, and it is reasonable to conclude that his years of dwelling in this city had rendered his judgment incapable of operating properly in the midst of a crisis. There is no justification for Lot's offering of his daughters, no manner of interpretation that lessons the crime. There is only the example that it offers time immemorial, that continued association with wickedness, even if not participated in, will deaden one's own moral sensitivity and corrupt one's judgment. Lot is a conflicted man, but his long abode in the midst of inveterate wickedness has pretty much guaranteed that he will lose the conflict.

It has been surmised by one author that Lot's offer of his daughters was subterfuge, and attempt to stall for time and arrange an escape for his guests. The theory goes like this: as the 'men' will later ask Lot if he has any sons, daughters, etc. in the city, and as Lot does go to his sons-in-law to beg them to leave the city, it must be concluded that Lot *did not have daughters in the home*; his daughters lived with their husbands elsewhere in the city. Thus we convict Lot of a much lesser crime: lying. But this is a most unnatural and unnecessary interpretation. First, Lot was by this time well known in the city. Therefore, it would have been also known if Lot had virgin daughters living in his home or not. Indeed, if Lot's daughters were in fact married and living with their husbands, it is reasonable to assume that their husband's fathers (if not their

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[195] *Ibid.*; 500.
[196] Athas, *op cit*; 4.

husbands themselves) *were there, outside Lot's door*. For we have been told that the entire city came to Lot's house to harass the 'men.' Someone – and probably many – would have known that Lot did not have any virgin daughters to offer, and would have said as much. We thus have no recourse but to take Lot's statement at face value.

Second, the term 'son-in-law' need not indicate that a marriage had already been consummated, or even that the woman had left her father's home. It was more likely that the son-in-law would come to dwell in the wife's father's home rather than the other way around, so it has been concluded by most scholars – Jewish as well as Christian – that these two men were those to whom Lot's daughters were betrothed, as betrothal in the Ancient Near East was legally and ethically of the same nature as marriage (*cp* Joseph's intention to put away Mary 'secretly,' upon hearing of her pregnancy, though he was only betrothed to her at that time). There is no way around it, Lot "committed the sin of seeking to avert sin by sin."[197]

But they said, "Stand aside." Furthermore, they said, "This one came in as an alien, and already he is acting like a judge; now we will treat you worse than them." So they pressed hard against Lot and came near to break the door. **(19:9)**

This verse reveals to the reader, and to Lot, just what his position was in the city of Sodom, and how useless it had been for him to live there so many years, perhaps hoping against hope that his presence might leaven with goodness the lump of iniquity Sodom had become. It is noteworthy and commendable that Lot remained in such a situation for so long, without himself succumbing to the practices that would soon bring down the wrath of a holy God. Perhaps Lot was of a similar disposition as his uncle, and hoped that there might be a few in Sodom who would benefit from his good example. Such has been the rationale across the ages, for good people dwelling in the midst of the wicked, and we cannot say that in all instances this thinking is wrong. But the

[197] Keil & Delitzsch; 233.

example of Lot in Sodom does teach us two things. First, when the iniquity of a place is as notorious as was that of Sodom (*cp*. 13:13), the chances of reclamation are slim indeed. Such wickedness is often indicative of a place and a people having been abandoned by God "*to their reprobate minds,*" a prelude to final judgment. Second, when a 'good' person dwells in the midst of the wicked, even with the noble intention of reclamation, he or she cannot expect to be hauled out of harm's way by intervening angels. When the wrath of God comes upon the ungodly, even the godly in the midst of them will suffer. It is hard to escape the conclusion that Lot would have been far better off had he never 'lifted his eyes' and beheld the Valley of Siddim.

But the men reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. They struck the men who were at the doorway of the house with blindness, both small and great, so that they wearied themselves trying to find the doorway.
(19:10-11)

The houseguests had both seen and heard enough, and it was time for them to reveal their true identity and to exercise their commission. We are not told what the 'men' thought of Lot's offer of his daughters in their stead, but we can rest assured by their actions that they would not have agreed to such an arrangement. The 'blindness' with which they struck the Sodomites refers not to the darkness of lost sight, but rather to the confusion of sight, so that a man does not see what he thinks he sees, and all is thrown into chaos. This condition apparently lasted through the night, as the 'men' spent from then until dawn arranging the rescue of Lot and his family.

Then the two men said to Lot, "Whom else have you here? A son-in-law, and your sons, and your daughters, and whomever you have in the city, bring them out of the place; for we are about to destroy this place, because their outcry has become so great before the LORD that the LORD has sent us to destroy it." Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were to marry his daughters, and said, "Up, get out of this place, for the LORD will destroy the city." But he appeared to his sons-in-law to be jesting. **(19:12-14)**

Where sin abounds, grace much more abounds. The grace of God will extend to Lot's immediate family, but on the same condition on which it applies to Lot – that they make haste to depart from Sodom before the angels destroy the city. Here we meet Lot's sons-in-law, the number of which is not mentioned. The NASB takes the view that there were two, and they were betrothed to Lot's daughters who still lived in the home. But the Hebrew is not that precise, and it may be that Lot had other daughters who were married and living with their husbands (though verse 37 refers to one of the daughters who escapes the city as Lot's 'first born'). In any event, these were men of the city, natives who had long since lost all sensitivity to such concepts as God and judgment; they just laughed at Lot.[198] In the end, only Lot, his wife, and two daughters are led out of the city by the angels, and even this took some angelic effort.

When morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, "Up, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away in the punishment of the city." But he hesitated. So the men seized his hand and the hand of his wife and the hands of his two daughters, for the compassion of the LORD was upon him; and they brought him out, and put him outside the city. **(19:15-16)**

This is the first time we hear of Lot's wife, and while she will have perhaps the most enduring and memorable role in the whole event, her time on stage is very short (or, if tradition is true, really very, very long). Who was Lot's wife? There is no mention of Lot having a wife when he departed from Ur and from Haran with his uncle, and no mention of Lot taking a wife from the distant relatives as would Abraham's son Isaac, and then Isaac's son Jacob. The most

[198] Interestingly, the same word for 'laughter' *yitzak*, found in the previous chapters,is here used for scoffing. This is a literary thread that Moses is skillfully weaving through the Abrahamic narratives, especially with the birth of Isaac so near.

natural reading of the text leads to the conclusion that she was a daughter of Sodom; that Lot married an inhabitant of Sodom who bore him children who were themselves of the lineage and DNA, as it were, of Sodom. There is, of course, no way to substantiate this, but it is the simplest answer to the question, and also provides the reason why Lot's wife 'looked back' to her home as it was being destroyed.

The emphasis, however, of this passage is the hesitation of Lot and his family, as if they were less than fully convinced of what was about to happen. Thus we must not consider the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as similar to that of Pompeii in AD 79. In the latter famous event, there were many warnings in nature which could have led to the saving of many lives, had they been properly interpreted. The people of Pompeii *knew* something odd was happening several days at least before the volcano actually erupted. With Sodom and Gomorrah the destruction had no harbinger.

It was dawn; perhaps Lot considered the events of the previous night to have been a dream? The sun was shining; there was no indication in the air that a cataclysm was about to take place. Perhaps there had been tremors in the earth, but as we have seen, the Jordan Rift and the Dead Sea Transform lay astride a massive plate boundary; earthquakes large and small must have been commonplace then as they are now in southern California. Lot's behavior teaches us that departure from wrath is hardest when there is no forewarning – other than the word of God – that wrath is imminent. The whole event is itself prophetic, as our Lord teaches regarding the suddenness of His own return,

> *It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building; but on the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be [c]just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed.*
>
> (Luke 17:28-30)

It is apparent that the 'men' had a twofold commission: to destroy Sodom and the cities of the plain, and to rescue Lot. They could not do the former until they had successfully done the latter, so contrary to the prevailing Arminian view of the modern church, the angels 'dragged Lot kicking and screaming' out of Sodom. Well, no, he wasn't kicking and screaming; but he was whining, and continued to do so throughout his rescue. Certainly this is not to say that Lot's deliverance from Sodom was tantamount to his eternal salvation; of that we do not know. But it is to say that the rescue of Lot was entirely the gracious work of God, and we have certainly not been given any evidence of merit on Lot's part to justify such grace.

The sun had risen over the earth when Lot came to Zoar. Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven, and He overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. But his wife, from behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt. **(19:23-26)**

For the sake of brevity, if that can be salvaged, we pass over Lot's pleading to be allowed to escape to the nearby city of Zoar (whose name is thus changed to Zoar, as it once was called Bela). It is remarkable that one of the five cities is spared for the benefit of Lot (an entire wicked city spared for just one 'righteous' man, and him not even a resident of that city!). It may be that God had another motive for sparing the smaller city, to stand as a memorial to the destruction of the other four. In any event, the village of Zoar did remain for many, many centuries, and is attested in the journals of the crusaders of the Middle Ages, and in many Arabic writings.

Of course, the most memorable portion of this passage is the record of what happened to Lot's wife: she turned to look on the city (of her birth?), and

"Lot's Wife"

was herself turned to a pillar of salt. Many throughout the ages have claimed to have seen this pillar, 'Lot's Wife,' including the 1st Century Jewish historian Josephus. There is a geological feature in the southern Dead Sea area called Mt. Sodom, known today as "Lot's Wife." But mankind does not need a physical pillar of salt to know the meaning of what happened to Lot's wife.

> *On that day, the one who is on the housetop and whose goods are in the house must not go down to take them out; and likewise the one who is in the field must not turn back.* ***Remember Lot's wife****. Whoever seeks to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it.* (Luke 17:31-33)

Calvin writes, "And hence we perceive how fatal an evil security is, which so inebriates, yea, fascinates, the minds of the wicked, that they no longer think God sits as Judge in heaven; and thus they stupidly sleep in sin, till, while they are saying, 'Peace and safety,' they are overwhelmed in sudden ruin."[199]

Now Abraham arose early in the morning and went to the place where he had stood before the LORD; and he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the valley, and he saw, and behold, the smoke of the land ascended like the smoke of a furnace. Thus it came about, when God destroyed the cities of the valley, that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot lived. **(19:27-29)**

This is a poignant scene, and one that properly orients the entire narrative to Abraham, God's friend. There is literary beauty in the understated manner in which Moses relates Abraham's part in the whole saga. Apparently the patriarch passed the night in peace, and rose early the next day in anticipation of the events of which he learned the day before. No one knows his thoughts as he approaches the ridge from where, the day before, he and the LORD negotiated, as it were, for the cities of the plain. Perhaps he went to bed convinced that there would be at least ten 'righteous' in the cities and that they would be spared.

[199] Calvin; 505.

Perhaps he was anxious – though there is no betrayal of anxiety in the text – over his nephew Lot, knowing all these years the error the younger man had made and was making. Abraham is not told that Lot has been spared; all he sees is destruction. Notably, the terminology used in describing what the patriarch saw is the same that is used so frequently to describe the smoke ascending from the burnt offering. For all Abraham knew, his nephew had just been sacrificed to the holy judgment of God. This is the beauty of it: we simply do not know what Abraham was thinking as he ascended the ridge, nor are we made privy to his thoughts when he beheld the complete destruction of the cities below or turned to go back home. Scripture, which can be so graphic at times, still so often leaves the reader to his own thoughts.

Abraham is brought into the narrative at this point in order to tie up the string connecting Chapter 19 with Chapter 18, and to display the justice and righteousness of God to the patriarch. Abraham is the central figure; all others are peripheral. Even Lot's deliverance must be attributed in greater measure to the intercession of Abraham – or at least to the fact that Lot was related to Abraham – than to any 'righteousness' found in Lot. "Any merit on Lot's part that may have resulted in his rescue has obviously been subordinated to the central importance of Abraham's intercession on his behalf."[200] After the sequel to the destruction of Sodom, the remainder of Chapter 19, we will hear no more of Lot, forever. And it can be argued that what we do hear about Lot's incestuous relations with his daughters, bears on the overall patriarchal narratives only inasmuch as the descendents – Moab and Ammon – became perennial adversaries of Abraham's descendant, Israel.

Then the firstborn said to the younger, "Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of the earth. Come, let us make our father drink wine, and let us lie with him that we may preserve our family through our father."
(19:31-32)

[200] Sailhamer; 174. Though again it is assumed that Abraham did intercede specifically on behalf of Lot.

If any doubt remained regarding the moral ambiguities of Lot's life, this closing episode of the narrative ought to set the matter to rest. "Without doubt the narrative now contains indirectly a severe judgment on the incest in Lot's house, and Lot's life becomes inwardly and outwardly bankrupt."[201] The behavior of Lot's daughters is entirely in accord with the moral climate of Sodom, whence they came. It is Lot's weakness that is most troubling – the man has been brought to the lowest point imaginable: he is no longer a man, but rather a breeding stud. "It was not lust, but the wish to keep their race from perishing that impelled them. The means was however worthy of Sodom, and Lot became the blind instrument of an infamy punishable by the subsequent law with death by fire."[202]

We are not told why Lot left the city to which he pleaded that he might escape from Sodom, *instead* of escaping to the mountains as the angels first commanded. We are also not told why Lot did not travel back to his uncle, to dwell where perhaps he should never have departed. Now he is in those mountains (which traditionally are the mountains of Moab, Lot's son by his oldest daughter) that he was afraid to flee to at the destruction of Sodom. He departs from Sodom somewhat as a man departs from this life, with nothing. Liberal scholars insist that this story is included because of Moses' anger at the Moabites and Ammonites for opposing the passage of the children of Israel through their land. But this interpretation does not fit with the divine command that the Moabites and Ammonites not be molested by the Israelites due to their descent from Lot, Abraham's nephew.

> *So we passed beyond our brothers the sons of Esau, who live in Seir, away from the Arabah road, away from Elath and from Ezion-geber. And we turned and passed through by the way of the wilderness of Moab. Then the LORD said to me, 'Do not harass Moab, nor provoke them to war, for I will not give you any of their land as a possession, because I have given Ar to the sons of Lot as a possession.'* (Deuteronomy 2:8-9)

[201] Von Rad; 224.
[202] Delitzsch; 63.

The names given to the sons born of this incestuous interlude are indicative of the desire of the Lot's daughters to propagate their father's lineage. *Moab* seems to signify primarily *of* or *from the father*, and *Ben-Ammi* refers to *the son of my people* in the sense of the beginning or continuation of a people. It is a sad ending to a tragic story, reminiscent however to the ending of the previous destruction narrative – that of the Flood. The same instance of intoxication (this time Lot, then Noah) and sin (then, the sin of Ham; here, that of Lot's daughters). Lot, however, is no longer even able to comment on the behavior of his daughters and the result; he speaks neither in approbation or judgment of their actions, but remains entirely mute. "Lot is never mentioned again. Separated both outwardly and inwardly from Abraham, he was of no further importance in relation to the history of salvation, so that even his death is not referred to."[203] The reader sensed in Chapter 13 that Lot's decision to sojourn toward the cities of the plain was not a good idea. Of that judgment he is now fully convinced.

What did Abraham learn regarding the justice of God? Leon Kass' thoughts on this final question bear consideration.

> We wonder if something of what he learned as he witnessed the smoke rising from Sodom and Gomorrah may have prepared Abraham for his greatest trial, enabling him to respond without so much as a peep of protest about the suffering of the innocent when God asks him to become not just an accomplice in the death of Lot but an actual killer of his own beloved son.[204]

[203] Keil & Delitzsch; 238.
[204] Kass; 332.

Week 13: Abraham & Abimelech

Text Reading: Genesis 20:1 - 17

"There is scarcely another patriarchal story
whose content is so complicated and full of problems."
(Gerhard von Rad)

When reading the Bible as a 21st Century Western evangelical, we typically approach the text with two subconscious preconditions. First, we assume the narrative is presented in chronological order – or at least roughly so – in that each 'then' and 'therefore' refers back to the text immediately preceding. Second, we have been trained by the fundamentalist (meant in the historic, early 20th Century sense and not a later, pejorative one) view of inspiration to take the text at face value, without 'reading between the lines,' as it were. Both of these are reasonable presuppositions, but only if they are accurate to the text as it was written and preserved. We know that the Bible was written in an Oriental culture, now to be read in an Occidental culture. We know that the ancients were, shall we say, looser with chronology than we now would accept from modern historians (and we know they did not use footnotes, either). There is a certain undeniable rigidity to the writing of history, at least over the past few centuries, that we now superimpose back on to the text of the ancient record.

But then we come to Genesis 20, and to a second 'sister/wife' narrative. Do we take it at face value? Do we interpret it chronologically as we find it, situated between chapters 19 and 21? And if we do both of these things, does this not bother us? Consider some of the problems with the narrative in its current location:

- This would be the second time that Abraham passes his wife off as his sister. But this event is perhaps twenty years after the first one (Genesis12), and one might hope that Abraham had progressed further than this in his steadfastness and trust in Jehovah.
- The timing of the event is remarkable, if it follows directly on the heels of the Sodom narrative. Prior to the destruction of Sodom & Gomorrah, the

messenger of the LORD had informed Abraham that at the same time a year hence, he would have a son by his wife Sarah – this same wife that he now passes of to Abimelech as his sister. If Isaac was to be born within a twelvemonth of Abraham's meeting with the three 'men,' then the entirely of chapter 20 would have to take place within three months. Unless, of course, we assume as Andrew Fuller does, that Sarah is already pregnant when she and Abraham journey to Gerar.

- The sheer danger of Sarah becoming the wife of another man within the timeframe of the most specific promise yet concerning the arrival of the promised son, and of allegations arising that the child not be Abraham's, makes the placement of this event immediately following the Sodom narrative problematic, at least.
- The depth of Abraham's unfaithfulness in Genesis 20, contrasted with the height of obedience recorded in Chapter 22, is remarkable and almost unbelievable, if the events of Chapter 20 occurred immediately after the renewal of the divine promise of a seed born to Abraham through Sarah.

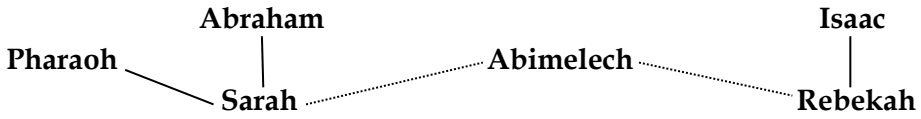
Another hermeneutical problem that we cannot overlook is the remarkable similarity between this narrative and the one which follows in Chapter 26 where we find Abraham's son Isaac doing the same thing his father had done, passing off his wife Rebekah as his sister, and to Abimelech the king. Now we have already noted in conjunction with Chapter 12, that 'Abimelech' is probably not a proper name, but rather a title. The 'name' means "*My father, the king,*" and was most likely the title adopted by the kings of the region of Gerar, and perhaps the Philistines more generally, in the same manner as all rulers of Egypt were called 'Pharaoh.'[205] Thus we are well within reasonable exegesis to conclude that the Abimelech of Abraham's day was not the Abimelech of Isaac's day – perhaps a father or grandfather. Still, the similarity between the two stories has always generated questions as to their relative authenticity – were they different accounts of the same event? And, if so, did the actual historical event occur with Abraham and Sarah, or with Isaac and Rebekah?

This question is intensified if the event recorded in Genesis 20 is placed chronologically immediately after the destruction of Sodom, for that places the

[205] *Cf.* Jamieson, Fausset, & Brown; 166.

two latter 'sister/wife' narratives within the same generation of each other. Consider the following diagram of the three 'sister/wife' events recorded in Genesis:

The credibility of the middle narrative is influenced by the time distance between the 'two' Abimelechs (we do not have any biblical proof that the Abimelech of Chapter 20 is not the Abimelech of Chapter 26). Critical scholars conclude that there are only two historical events, not three, and that the third narrative comes from a corrupted tradition that conflates and confuses the person of Abimelech. Whether the 'real' Abimelech story involves Abraham or Isaac, the diagram would appear as follows (somewhat similar to molecular resonance…for any Chemistry majors out there):



Where the dashed line between Sarah and Abimelech might actually be the dashed line between Abimelech and Rebekah.

If we accept that there were three 'sister/wife' events – two involving Abraham & Sarah; one with Isaac & Rebekah – then the credibility of the narrative would be improved if the time period between the 'Abimelechs' were longer, ensuring that these were not, in fact, the same man.

In the absence of any evidence in the Genesis narratives concerning the identity of the 'two' Abimelechs, the reader is left with the impression that they are one and the same man. But the presentation of Abimelech in Genesis 20, as we shall see, is of a man whose moral sensitivity would render it unlikely for him to fall into the same trap with the son of the man in regard to whose wife he first got into trouble with God. Genesis 21 informs us of a covenant between Abraham and the first Abimelech; it is reasonable to assume that this king of Gerar was aware of Abraham's son, and probably continued to know of him as he grew into adulthood (he might even have considered marrying a daughter to this son of a wealthy Bedouin prince whose "God was with him in everything he did" (Genesis 21:22). Gerhard von Rad was not overstating the case when he wrote, "There is scarcely another patriarchal story whose content is so complicated and full of problems."[206]

The difficulty really comes in when we take the narrative of the second 'sister/wife' story as happening chronologically in accord with its placement in the overall Abrahamic patriarchal story. If the events of Chapter 20 take place immediately after the events of Chapters 18 & 19, the whole narrative becomes, while still plausible, yet far more tenuous and troublesome. But do we have any warrant for interpreting Genesis 20 in any other manner than strictly chronologically?

To begin with, we must acknowledge that the narratives that we have encountered in Genesis were, at least in part, the result of Moses' compilation of oral and written traditions, and were not immediately given to him via direct revelation from God. It is indeed possible that the stories that we have encountered thus far were put directly into Moses' mind by God, with no other source of information utilized, but this view of inspiration fails to explain the remarkable similarities between so many of the stories and others found in the literary archaeology of the Ancient Near East. Furthermore, we have evidence

[206] Von Rad; 230.

from other books of the Bible that not only were chronicles and records kept of which we have no extant evidence today, but that they were consulted in the writing of histories. We think, of course, of Luke, who investigated the matters about which he wrote to Theophilus in both his gospel and the Book of Acts.

> ***Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.***
>
> (Luke 1:1-4)

It is neither unreasonable nor heretical to surmise that Moses had access to the chronicles of Pharaoh's court, and perhaps even took many with him when he led the Israelites from captivity in that land. We believe that the Spirit of God guided Moses in the study and compilation of what must have been a vast array of both oral and written traditions concerning the earliest millennia of mankind's history, and also preserved him from error in the summarizing of the data. But this conviction need not rule out the use of sources by Moses, as it certainly cannot rule out the use of sources by Luke.

Once we conclude that most of the chroniclers of Scripture probably utilized source material, we have to ask: 'Was there a necessary pattern to their compilations?' Did they of necessity follow a strictly chronological approach? Or did other paradigms guide their editing and summarizing of the data? It does not take long to realize that the perspective of the writer of I & II Chronicles is different from the one (or ones) who compiled I & II Kings. The desire to interpret historical narratives in a chronological manner has caused great difficulty to those who have attempted 'harmonies' of the four Gospels, for between the four historical accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus, events that to all outward appearances are identical occur in different places in the narrative.

This fact is due to the reality that the biblical writers were not so hidebound by chronology as their 21st Century readers. Indeed, material is far more likely to be organized *thematically*, and only follow a chronological progression broadly. In other words, we expect to find the stories within the Abrahamic narratives to be roughly chronological (and not to find stories of Noah or Jacob mixed in), but should not be surprised to find a story within that narrative family organized according to theme rather than calendar.

Still, we cannot simply move the chronology of a story in order to make it fit more comfortably into an overall view of how things ought to be. For instance, we believe that, by the time of Yahweh's visit with Abraham in Chapter 18, the patriarch is 'over' the subterfuge of passing off his wife as his sister. We certainly want to believe that he would not do such a thing immediately upon hearing that his wife was to deliver a son, the promised seed, within a year of that divine interview. But do we have any warrant to place the narrative of Genesis 20 somewhere else *chronologically*, while leaving it exactly where we find it, *thematically*? Actually, we do.

Now Abraham journeyed from there toward the land of the Negev, and settled between Kadesh and Shur; then he sojourned in Gerar. **(20:1)**

The first evidence is rather the lack of information found in verse 1 compared to similar statements elsewhere in the Abrahamic narrative. For instance, we are not told 'from where' he journeyed toward the land of the Negev. This is odd, since the language is sequential and should follow a description of where Abraham was, from whence *"he journeyed…toward the land of the Negev."* The transition is therefore abrupt. "No place is mentioned in connection with the patriarch's name in the context immediately preceding. We must look back to ch. xiii.18; for all the transactions related in the intermediate

chapters took place while Abraham had his head-quarters established in 'Mamre, which is in Hebron.'"[207]

Nor are we told *why* he traveled at this time (whatever time this may be). We are left be the text surmising – which is what most commentators do – as to why Abraham would leave his settled abode in Hebron, by the oaks of Mamre, and travel to Gerar. He will be back in Hebron when Sarah dies (Gen. 23:2) and will purchase the cave of Machpelah to bury her in – the only title deed that Abraham will possess of the land that is to be his inheritance. While it is evident from subsequent chapters that Abraham did travel toward the land of the Philistines, and contracted a covenant with this same Abimelech near Beersheba, there is no evidence that his primary dwelling was, at this stage of his life, anywhere other than by the oaks of Mamre in Hebron.

When Abram journeyed to Egypt, and got into trouble the first time trying to pass off his wife as his sister, the reason was clear: there was a severe famine in the land of Canaan, and Abram was traveling in search of food. Here, in Chapter 20, there is no such justification or motivation given for his travel – though it must be admitted that a reason need not be given. However, in the earlier narrative we are also told which direction Abraham traveled. At that time the patriarch was traveling through the land of Canaan from north to south, and continued on to the south, heading toward Egypt. Here in Chapter 20 we are not told from whence Abraham journeyed, which leaves open the possibility that it was from somewhere other than Hebron. John Sailhamer points out that the phrase "*from there*" in Genesis 20:1, "suggests that it was preceded by a narrative that had specified Abraham's whereabouts."[208] But the preceding narrative to Chapter 20 is that of the destruction of Sodom and the rescue of Lot. The geographical bearing leading into Chapter 20 is not of Abraham, but of Lot dwelling in the caves of the Moabite mountains. It is, therefore, possible that the

[207] Jamieson, Fausset, & Brown; 165.
[208] Sailhamer, John *The Meaning of the Pentateuch: Revelation, Composition, and Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVPAcademic; 2009); 269.

geographical linkage "*from there*" belongs to an earlier narrative, and has been separated and relocated to this place in order to continue a theme.

In summary, from the opening verse of the chapter we must begin to assume things: first, we must assume that Abraham journeys from Hebron toward the Negev; second, we must assume why the patriarch takes this journey. This is the traditional hermeneutical approach to the story, as evidenced by the following commentators, who uniformly assume that the events of Chapter 20 follow chronologically upon those of Chapter 19.

> His motive for removing might be a necessity to obtain fresh pasture; but considering it was immediately subsequent to the destruction of the plain, it probably was fear to dwell amongst the Canaanites.[209]

> After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham removed from the grove of Mamre at Hebron to the south country, hardly from the same fear as that which led Lot from Zoar, but probably to seek a better pasture.[210]

> It is, however, unknown what was his intention in removing, or what necessity impelled him to change his place; we ought, however, to be persuaded, that he had not transferred his abode to another place for any insufficient cause; especially since a son, whom he had not even dared to wish for, had been lately promised him, through Sarah.[211]

It is usually a good sign, when commentators flail about with divergent opinions, that their premises are incorrect to begin with. While it is certainly within the realm of possibility that the text simply leaves the reader in the dark as to where Abraham was before he traveled to the Negev, this is a very unusual construction in the text, and would most *naturally* would follow a geographical description of his whereabouts similar, as JF&B point out, to what we last read in

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[209] Jamieson, Fausset, & Brown; 165. The commentators do not say why Abraham should have been afraid to dwell among the Canaanites, nor do they explain why he traveled to the Negev, which was itself populated by Canaanites.

[210] Keil & Delitzsch; 238. Here K & D opt for exactly the opposite conclusion from JF&B, though they also do not explain why Abraham would expect to find better pasturage in the desert of the Negev rather than the hill country of Hebron.

[211] Calvin; 520. Considering the manner in which Abraham deals with Sarah in Chapter 20, we ought not be persuaded of anything sound concerning the patriarch's intentions!

Chapter 13, verse 18, *"Then Abram moved his tent and came and dwelt by the oaks of Mamre, which are in Hebron, and there he built an altar to the LORD."*

But perhaps there is a better explanation of the location of this narrative immediately following that of Lot and the destruction of Sodom – one that is not chronological, but thematic. Consider the following chronological reconstruction – and then we will investigate the passage to see if there is any textual support for a different chronology.

What if the events recorded in Chapter 20 were actually immediately after those recorded in Chapter 12, where we first read of the 'sister/wife' deception when Abram and Sarai go down (through the Negev) to Egypt? If the texts were arranged thus chronologically, we would have the following construction:

> *Then Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her and go." Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him; and they escorted him away, with his wife and all that belonged to him. (Gen. 12:18-20)… Now Abraham journeyed from there toward the land of the Negev, and settled between Kadesh and Shur; then he sojourned in Gerar. Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." So Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. (Gen 20:1-2)*

This construction is more natural based on the language of the opening verse of Chapter 20, both in the fact that the closing verses of Chapter 12 have Abraham being escorted out of Egypt, and that the opening verses have him traveling toward (*back to*) the land of the Negev. This arrangement also places the 'sister/wife' events – insofar as they relate to Abraham and Sarah – together, as a chronicler may have done, from whom Moses may have derived his source material. This would, of course, also obviate the problem of the patriarch making so ridiculous an action so late in his tutelage under the covenant – the first 'sister/wife' deception was quite early in Abram's sojourning, and may be passed of as either happening *before* Abram believed (as recorded in Chapter 15), or as the weakness of a neophyte. It is hard to explain Abraham's actions in

Chapter 20, considering his moral uprightness in Chapter 18 (the defense of the righteous), and his remarkable faith in Chapter 22 (the offering of Isaac). Chapters 18 and 22 represent the highest peaks of Mt. Everest to the Dead Sea depression of Chapter 20.

But do we have any warrant from the text of Chapter 20 to relocate the chronology to an earlier period in the patriarch's life? Other than the uncertainty aroused by the opening verse, the narrative follows a similar pattern in Chapter 20 to the illicit relationship developed with Pharaoh in Chapter 12, with the notable exception that Abimelech exhibits a far higher moral standard than Pharaoh – and, significantly, than Abraham. The first hint that the narrative might come from an earlier period in Abraham's sojourning comes in his own 'defense' before Abimelech. Two things he says there are unusual if they are to be placed so far into Abraham's life, both from verse 13,

> *…and it came about, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said to her, 'This is the kindness which you will show to me: everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother."*

First, consider the premeditated plan unfolded here: *everywhere we go, say that you are my sister and I am your brother*. Abraham reveals to Abimelech a pattern of life that he had initiated, apparently, when he first left his homeland: "*everywhere we go, say of me, 'He is my brother.'*" If this were still the modus operandi of the patriarch some twenty-five years into his journey, we would be dealing with a remarkably inveterate distrust of divine providence, in spite of all that God has done in the intervening years. If Chapter 20 fits chronologically where we find it in our Bibles, then this pattern of life has been going on for twenty to twenty-five years, a very sad testimony indeed of the great patriarch.

As we believe we have seen Abraham progressing in both faith and knowledge, it certainly makes sense to attempt to find a better explanation of the order of events, rather than to acknowledge such a base unbelief at the very core

of the patriarch's life – his relationship with his wife, the mother of promise. But even more remarkable is the way that Abraham speaks to Abimelech concerning 'God.'

The English translations uniformly translate *Elohim* in verse 13 as 'God,' though in this unusual instance the associated verb is plural, not singular as it always is when *Elohim* refers to the true and only God. We understand that that word *Elohim* is itself plural, but the singularity of monotheism is preserved in Scripture by the use of singular verbs with the plural divine name. Calvin writes, "I grant, indeed, that the *noun* Elohim is frequently taken for God in the Scripture; but then the *verb* with which it is connected is always singular."[212] Here in verse 13 it is otherwise – the verb is plural. Though Calvin concludes that the word *Elohim* here means 'angels,' the correct translation is "*when the gods caused me to wander…*" Most commentators recognize this noun-verb arrangement in verse 13, but then pass it off as if Abraham were simply speaking in a manner that Abimelech – presumably a polytheist – would understand.

This whole verse (20:13) is remarkable for the absence of any developed faith or knowledge on the part of Abraham, and far better fits the situation of relative ignorance that characterized the patriarch's early journeys than the more mature faith that has witnessed the 'cutting of the covenant,' and has pleaded for the righteous in the wicked cities of the plain. Robert Alter comments, "It is also noteworthy that Abraham, far from suggesting that God has directed him to a promised land, stresses to the native king that the gods have imposed upon him a destiny of wandering."[213] Abraham's actions are Certainly reprehensible, but his attitude toward God is even worse, especially if the events of which we read in Chapter 20 did indeed happen so late in the

Robert Alter (b. 1935)

[212] Calvin; 531.
[213] Alter, Robert *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co.; 1996); 95.

patriarch's life and walk with the LORD. But much of this is explained – or at least better understood – if these events and Abraham's words occurred much earlier, soon after his arrival in Canaan when his faith was still either not yet born, or still very young and weak. But to what purpose would Moses take a story from an earlier time and insert it here, following the destruction narrative of Sodom? If the events of Chapter 20 are not within the context *chronologically*, then what *theme* benefits from their being here rather than after Chapter 12? The answer to these questions may derive from another part of Abraham's defense for his indefensible actions.

And Abraham said, "Because I thought, surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will kill me on account of my wife. **(20:11)**

No one shines brighter in this narrative than Abimelech, the king of Gerar. That is in itself quite remarkable…and therefore must be remarked upon. The record of events does not hide this fact, and portrays Abimelech as a much nobler and more ethically sensitive man than Abraham. Abimelech comes across in the narrative as the one who has been wronged – even God acknowledges that the king was innocent – yet he humbly submits to God's prophet, Abraham, and makes generous restitution (and a chivalrous gesture as well) to Abraham and Sarah. Quite a different story than Egypt!

But it is Abraham's expectation that gives us the clue as to the theme for which this story has been imported. The patriarch anticipates that there will be *no fear of God* among the Gerites. His assessment of Abimelech's people is amazing considering his previous confidence that there must be *some* righteous people among the Sodomites. Abraham thought there would be righteous found in Sodom, and there were not; Abraham thought that the people of Gerar were without the fear of God, but they actually feared Him perhaps more than the patriarch did himself! The connection between these narratives is the *righteous judgment of God*, which is what Abraham had to learn if he was to be the

progenitor of the people of God. "*For I have chosen him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, to keep the way of the LORD by doing* ***righteousness and justice****…*"[214] This, then, is the theme that unites the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah in Chapter 19, and Abraham and Abimelech in Chapter 20, with the divine election of Abraham as the father of God's people, in Chapter 18.

Chapter 18 and Chapter 20 are also tied together in the response of the two protagonists – Abraham in Chapter 18 and Abimelech in Chapter 20 – to the threat of divine judgment. Compare Abraham's bold query,

> *Abraham came near and said, "Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?"* (18:23)

With Abimelech's plaintive cry,

> *Now Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, "Lord, will You slay a nation, even though blameless?* (20:4)

The word translated 'blameless' in 20:4 is the very same word translated 'righteous' in 18:23, firmly tying the two passages together as a continuing manifestation of the righteous judgment of God, set against the mistaken judicial assessments of His covenant partner, Abraham. "The particularly complicated question about guilt is the center of interest, and thus the emphasis is shifted to another level."[215] In a very powerful sense, Chapters 18 & 20 (with Chapter 19 being the vivid denouement) are the divine answer to Abraham's question, "*Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?*" Indeed He shall, and it will not often look like what even His own people think it should look like.

It seems as though one of the purposes for this narrative being included in the Abrahamic patriarchal history, and in this location, is to contrast the men of Sodom with the men of Gerar – evidently to show Abraham himself that the

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[214] Genesis 18:19
[215] Von Rad; 227.

judgment of God is alone righteous. Not only do we see Abimelech has a very submissive and malleable human being before the Lord, we find his courtiers to also be cognizant of *"the fear of God,"* the very thing Abraham assumed was wholly lacking from that land.

> *So Abimelech arose early in the morning and called all his servants and told all these things in their hearing; and the men were greatly frightened.* (20:8)

In Abimelech we find a 'righteous' man – and quite a contrast to Lot in Sodom, too. Abimelech pleads his case before the Lord in his dream, and maintains that his decision to bring Sarah into his house was based on their joint testimony concerning their relationship as brother and sister. Even Sarah, in accordance with *"the kindness"* that she promised to do her husband, enters the game by claiming to be Abraham's sister. *"And she, even she herself, said…"* The Hebrew here displays a man who is beside himself with 'fear of God' and seeking to establish what he is sure to be true: that God will not destroy a righteous people. Robert Alter describes Abimelech's protest concerning Sarah's self-witness, where he essentially stutters out multiple feminine pronouns in order to get his point across to God. "This repetitive splutter of indignation is vividly registered in the Hebrew, though the existing translations smooth it over."[216]

To Sarah he said, "Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; behold, it is your vindication before all who are with you, and before all men you are cleared."
(20:16)

Abimelech's honor overflows into chivalry. He has 'accepted' Abraham's explanation of the deception without debate, and acts the part of the offending party, though indeed he was as much offended as offending. He gives Abraham presents and offers him the choicest parts of his kingdom in which to dwell. But to Sarah he is especially solicitous. First, though he knows otherwise, he refers to

[216] Alter; 93.

Abraham as Sarah's 'brother' – maintaining the charade so as to pretend that the patriarch and his wife had committed no deception. He was, as it were, deciding against a marriage that had not been consummated. But he was paying the price for a 'rejected' woman – a woman restored to her family, unmolested and still pure. The phrase translated by the NASB as *"it is your vindication,"* is literally, *"it is a covering of the eyes to you,"* and it is difficult to interpret. It may allude to the veil worn by virgins, a public testimony to their chastity. Or it may be that Sarah herself should view this event as if it had never occurred. It does seem proper to interpret the whole event as Abimelech's restitution of Sarah's honor. In all we find Abimelech a more admirable character than we do Abraham; another argument for adjusting the chronology of the narrative if at all possible.

These narrative events – the episode of Lot in Sodom and the interchange between Abraham and Abimelech – are illustrative of the principles of divine righteousness and judgment which the Lord is teaching His servant/prophet Abraham. With regard to Sodom Abraham appears to the reader quote noble, though misguided, in his concern that the 'righteous' be preserved from divine wrath. In comparison to Abimelech, however, the patriarch does not shine very brightly. Abraham the Chosen displays unbelief, passing off his wife as his sister in order to save his own skin. Abimelech the Pagan, on the other hand, acts in innocence and repents of his deeds immediately upon notification from God that he was in the wrong. "It is humiliating for Abraham to have to be surpassed by the heathen in the fear of God."[217] It may be that the story of Abraham and Abimelech is placed after Chapter 19 correctly from a chronological perspective – there is no impossibility to it at all. But the weakness of Abraham's faith, and his continued dependence on his own wiles, fairly scream for our understanding it as an earlier event, relocated purposefully to reinforce the current teaching with regard to the righteousness and justice of God.

[217] Von Rad; 229.

Week 14: Interlude

Text Reading: Genesis 21:1 - 34

"But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh
persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit;
so it is now also."
(Paul)

Chapter 21 is an interesting chapter from the perspective of the exegesis of the Abrahamic narratives. First, it is a much calmer passage than many of the others – somewhat of an interlude among the more tension-filled (and sometimes sin-filled) chapters we have grown accustomed to in the recorded life of the first patriarch. Nothing dramatic happens in Chapter 21, unless one considers the birth of Isaac to be 'dramatic.' It is not, really. It has been predicted by God, who has also acted to preserve Abraham and Sarah from the folly of their own ways, which might have derailed the promise if not for the steadfast faithfulness of God. When the birth of the promised son finally comes, it is indeed a cause for 'laughter' and rejoicing, but it is also somewhat anticlimactic in the manner in which it is portrayed. *"So Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age…"*

The chapter is not, of course, without crisis. But the crises recorded in Chapter 21 – the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, and the conflict/covenant between Abraham and Abimelech – have been foreshadowed, and are nowhere near as dramatic as earlier situations involving the same characters. It seems to be a chapter of 'tying up loose ends,' before the ultimate drama, the sacrifice of Isaac on Mt. Moriah in Chapter 22. Thereafter the life of Abraham settles into a steady procession until the patriarch's death, seventy-five years after the birth of Isaac.

Another unique feature of Chapter 21 – acknowledging again that the chapter divisions are not original nor inspired – is the combination of two seemingly unrelated stories: the birth of Isaac & expulsion of Ishmael on the one

hand, and the conflict and covenant between Abraham and Abimelech on the other. Again, the tenor of the chapter makes it seem like a good place to pause and take stock of matters as they pertain to what has gone before, prior to moving on to greater things yet to come. There is a reason for this material being located where we find it – it transitions and introduces us to an area of southern Palestine where we will find Isaac dwelling for most of his adult life. Nonetheless, it is somewhat anticlimactic as it sits between the events of the preceding chapters and the following chapter. An Interlude; a place to pause and reflect.

This is by no means to say that Chapter 21 is of less significance than the other chapters in the Abrahamic narrative. As if to guard against such a conclusion, the Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle Paul to incorporate the first part of Chapter 21 into his allegorical interpretation of the lives of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac in Galatians 4. The calmness of Chapter 21 may be deceiving; spiritually a great battle was going on behind the relatively calm scenes we encounter here. This spiritual warfare is manifested, perhaps like mild waves on the surface of a very troubled sea, in the conflicts that continue between Sarah and Hagar, and the tension and resolution of the relationship between Abraham and Abimelech.

Nonetheless, the tone of the chapter is more sedate, more reflective and summary, than the preceding or following chapters. Thus we will take the occasion to do what the tenor of the writing seems to ask us to do: *reflect*. It is as if we have reached the final way station before ascending the last, difficult climb to the top of Everest (Chapter 22); we pause to catch our breath. What have we learned along with Abraham in his journeying from Ur of the Chaldees to the point of fulfillment of that seminal (pun intended) promise of grace, the birth of Isaac? Can we, with him, trace a development of our own faith along the lines of his experience? To trace the path taken by the patriarch, let us review the whole of his life, as recorded by Moses, in a somewhat chronological sequence to serve

as a backdrop to a more important analysis of where Abraham has come before his last, great test in the next chapter. In an attempt to put the whole in a visible format, Table I summarizes the events of Abram/Abraham's life aligned as best we can with the age of the patriarch when these events occurred. Included are the ages of the patriarch, his wife Sarah, and his sons Ishmael and Isaac, at the various milestones we can discern with somewhat clear chronology from the narrative. Two events stand outside the chronology, and several are of uncertain placement as to the exact age of Abraham, though we are confident of their upper and lower markers. Some points of consideration:

- The light blue shading indicates those periods in Abraham's life when he either definitely, or most likely, dwelled in Hebron, by the oaks of Mamre. We find him settling there after his separation from Lot. He is most likely there when he negotiates with God over the 'righteous' in Sodom, and he is almost certainly living in Hebron when Sarah dies, and when he himself dies, as both the patriarch and his wife are buried in the cave of Machpelah, "*which faced Mamre.*" It is reasonable to conclude from this analysis that Abraham's usual domicile was Hebron (indicated by blue shading), though as a Bedouin herdsman, he undoubtedly traveled at times as the pasturage required. Additionally, as the Lord prospered him he most likely expanded his region of 'business,' again as his flocks and herds required.
- We notice that Isaac, at some point in his young adult life, moved away from his father and dwelt in places such as Beer-lahai-roi, Gerar (where he ran into the similar temptation and sin as his father before him), and Beer-sheva. It is interesting that Beer-lahai-roi was the first place where Hagar encountered God, which is why the place was so named (*cp.* Gen. 16:14).
- It remains difficult to place the second 'sister/wife' narrative involving Abraham and Abimelech, king of Gerar. From a 'spiritual growth' perspective we would certainly prefer locating it somewhere early in the patriarch's travels, perhaps just after his troublesome sojourn in Egypt (Gen. 12). There is perhaps a literary pointer that would signify such a placement of the 'sister/wife' stories as they regard Abraham: In Gen. 12:9 we read, "*An Abram journeyed on, continuing toward the Negev.*" And in Gen. 20:1 we read similarly, "*Now Abraham journeyed from there toward the land of the Negev…*"

    - Our last lesson outlined theological/discipleship reasons for locating an earlier story where we actually find it in Chapter 20, after the destruction

of Sodom & Gomorrah. There it was reasoned that the story had thematic bearing on the lesson that the patriarch was learning concerning 'righteousness and judgment,' and illustrated the wrongness of Abraham's judgment, contrasted with the perfect judgment and righteousness of God, "*the Judge of the whole earth.*"

- There is in Chapter 21 and following, perhaps, a literary justification for placing an earlier story (Abraham & Sarah & Abimelech) in the location where we actually find it, rather than chronologically. The Abimelech 'sister/wife' narrative introduces us to, of course, Abimelech, whom we find seeking out Abraham in order to make a covenant with him. And this event, in turn, introduces us to Beer-sheva, a place that will come to the fore in the narratives of the second and third patriarchs, Isaac and Jacob. Thus the logical arrangement of these 'floating' chapters is not chronological, but rather thematic and geographic.

If we allow the geographical chronology to inform the spiritual development of Abraham's life, and if we relocate the chronology of Chapter 20 (thought not the theme and the chapter itself) to an earlier phase of the patriarch's journeys, we arrive at two conclusions. First, we see that Abraham's life was not completely that of a wandering nomad (though he is called 'a wandering Aramaen' in Scripture, this refers primarily to his departure from Padan-Aram, or Haran). Though the only possession he ever held title deed to was the cave in which he buried his wife, and in which he himself would be buried, Abraham nonetheless *dwelt* by the oaks of Mamre near Hebron for most of his life in Canaan. We will see that his stay near Beer-sheva is called a 'sojourn,' indicating the temporariness of it in contrast to the more permanent reference to his dwelling by the oaks of Mamre in Hebron. The same will be found in regard to Isaac, who will dwell near Beer-sheva for most of his adult life. Beer-sheva will also be a place of significance in the life of Jacob, Abraham's grandson.

Thus the promise of the land, though explicitly stipulated as being for a future generation of Abraham's descendants, was granted in a practical sense to the patriarchs, who lived in a settled pastoral environment and were materially

blessed in the land of their inheritance. As we will see in our discussion of the covenant formed between Abraham and Abimelech, this aspect of the patriarchal narratives has an abiding lesson for God's people in all ages and in all their journeys in this world.

A second conclusion derived from this analysis is that we do see a spiritual development in Abraham, from the point at which his belief is "*credited to him as righteousness,*" to the point of his most severe trial, the offering of his only son, Isaac. During this progression of faith, the patriarch is steadily separated from all ties of the flesh – first from his nephew Lot, then from his son of the flesh, Ishmael, and then – to all intents and purposes – from his son of the promise, Isaac. In spite of his failings – and they were remarkable indeed – Abram/Abraham accomplished these 'separations' with very little visible struggle or resistance. Perhaps from this we may derive the timeless application of the fundamental covenant requirement upon all God's people: "*Come out from among them, and be separate, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people.*" 'Separation' is an essential characteristic of the people of God's covenant. But it is a 'separation' that does not leave the world; rather it separates while living in the midst of the world. It separates from 'father, mother, sister, brother,' whenever such separation is required to preserve the integrity of one's relationship with the covenant God. Abraham seemed to understand this far better than many of the other thins that the Lord taught him during the years of his journeys. Perhaps we may thus conclude that it is a very important principle even for those who are the children of Abraham through faith.

Then the LORD took note of Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had promised. So Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore to him, Isaac. Then Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. **(21:1-4)**

This is a remarkably subdued announcement of the fulfillment of the promise; almost 'matter-of-fact' in the paucity of words used. Of course, the

promises of God are 'matters-of-fact,' and perhaps this is the reason why the culmination of the promise is here announced with such simple prose. God does what He promised to do, and Abraham does what he has been commanded to do: he names the boy *Isaac*, and he circumcises his son on the eighth day, "*as God had commanded him.*" One almost feels as if Abraham and Sarah finally collapse over the finish line in exhaustion after the race, most of which was made the more difficult by their own folly and unbelief. Even the celebration is delayed until after Isaac is weaned, perhaps as much as four years from his birth.

Sarah's response is a bit more emotional, however; it is her turn to wax eloquent about what the LORD had done for her. The word 'laughter' again makes its frequent appearance in this chapter as it has done since Chapter 18, forming the thread – the name of the promised son – that is woven through these narrative accounts. Sarah's use of the word is understandably ambiguous: we are not sure if she means that folks will laugh *with* her on account of her good fortune, or laugh *at* the ridiculous story they will hear of Sarah bearing a son to Abraham in their dotage.

> *Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." And she said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."* (21:6-7)

The 'laughter' expressed as joy, incredulity, and exhausted relief by Abraham and Sarah over the past few chapters, become more sullen and foreboding when it comes from the 'other' son, Ishmael. With the birth of Isaac, the fragile equilibrium that had apparently existing for the previous fourteen years is broken, and tensions once again flare between Sarah and Hagar, the object being Hagar's son Ishmael, and the man in the middle once again being Abraham.

> *Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking. Therefore she said to Abraham, "Drive out this maid and her son, for the son of this maid shall not be an heir with my son Isaac."* (21:9-10)

The word translated 'mocking' by the NASB is a conjugation of the same word uniformly translated 'laughing' or 'laughter' in the previous passages. Yet it is universally rendered in a more negative sense, as 'making sport,' or 'ridiculing,' or as in the NASB, 'mocking.' This interpretation of the word is justified by Sarah's response, on the basis that (1) the matriarch has herself grown in faith to the point beyond personal pique against Hagar and her son, and (2), Sarah's ultimatum to her husband is approved and seconded by God. It is this attitude of Ishmael toward the toddler Isaac that is alluded to in the apostle's famous allegorical interpretation of this passage in Galatians 4,

> *But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also.* (Galatians 4:29)

Ishmael was by this time around sixteen years of age, perhaps as old as eighteen. He was no longer a boy, but a young man. Thus he had undoubtedly taken his place by his father's side in the day-to-day operations of the family economy, and was probably considered by the vast majority of Abraham's retainers to be the heir apparent. Certainly Eleazar of Damascus knew himself to be supplanted by his master's biological son, Ishmael, and we are given no indication that Abraham treated Ishmael as anything other than his son and heir. We are reminded of the patriarch's pleading with God earlier, "*Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!*" It would have been quite natural for Ishmael to grow to consider himself the lawful heir, and that he (and perhaps also his mother) would naturally have great resentment at the arrival of Isaac on the scene.

From Ishmael's perspective, however, the birth of Isaac did not matter significantly. In the ancient Near East the father often sired many, many children from multiple wives. King David did, and his heir did not turn out to be the son

of his first wife, or even of one of the early wives, but of Bathsheba, David's later acquisition and great sin. The birth order and the identity of the mother were not nearly as important as the common father, and his choice of heir. Ishmael may have felt secure in his position, and saw no danger in mocking this upstart babe, Isaac.

Sarah saw things differently, and in spite of the slowness of her coming to faith, we may conclude that she saw things maturely and 'covenantally.' She unequivocally states the case to her husband, "*the son of this maid shall not be an heir with my son Isaac.*" There will not be a sharing of the inheritance, either of the greatness of Abraham's wealth or, more importantly, of the participation within the covenant established with Abraham by God. While we cannot prove that Sarah had this much understanding of the matter, we do note that her insistence received God's approbation,

> *The matter distressed Abraham greatly because of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the lad and your maid; whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her, for through Isaac your descendants shall be named."* (21:11-12)

What follows is almost a reenactment of the first flight of Hagar from the tents of Abraham. This time, of course, she was sent out, whereas the first time she fled on her own initiative. Both times, however, she finds herself in great distress and near death, and both times God intervenes to rescue her, and to reassure her with promises concerning the future of her child. Because of Ishmael's relationship to Abraham, God promises to cause him to increase and to become a mighty people. As we have seen in an earlier lesson, Abraham's first son is widely considered to be the ancestor of the Arabs, who have been a chronically powerful, though never peaceful, people in the Middle East for millennia. This portion of the narrative reinforces two principles that we have learned through our journey in the Abrahamic narratives. First, that God is indeed faithful, and will bring to pass all that He has promised. Second, that the

promise to Abram that *"in you shall all nations be blessed,"* had immediate application to those who were *in* Abraham according to the flesh. Ishmael and, after him, Esau would become mighty nations within the circumscribed world of Palestine and the Arabian Peninsula, each on account not of his own fidelity to the Abrahamic Covenant, but solely on the basis of his biological relationship to the patriarch. The line of Abraham that possessed not only the biological but also the spiritual connection with him, would eventually place too much emphasis on the former, and all but forget the latter.

Thus far in our study we have remained, as best we have been able, within the text of Genesis, without spending too much time looking at the later fulfillment and typological significance of the Genesis text. This hermeneutic has been employed not to diminish the typical and prophetic nature of this first book, but rather to force us to focus on what the text says, rather than what later Scripture (and later commentators) say about the text. But the remarkable use of this particular event by the Apostle Paul, in his defense of the gospel to the Galatian churches, coupled with the anticlimactic nature of the current prose, almost forces us to move to the later text in order to see more clearly the meaning of the current one. Paul understood that this altercation between Ishmael and Isaac, while being historical, was also powerfully typological, and he enlists the event in Genesis 21 in support of his all-out defense of the gospel of grace, under severe attack among the churches Paul planted in Galatia almost 2,000 years later. Thus, in a departure from our usual format, we shift our attention from Genesis 21 to Galatians 4.

> *Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise.* (Galatians 4:21-23)

"Do you not listen to the law?" Paul asks, before pulling from Genesis 21 his illustration in support of his defense. Thus the apostle includes Abraham within

the over-arching rubric of 'the law,' expanding beyond the Ten Commandments and the Levitical/Aaronic sacrificial regime. 'The law,' to him, says *"Cast out the bond woman…"* for the true inheritance is by virtue of the promise alone, and not by flesh.

Paul tells his readers that his interpretation of the Genesis passage is *'allegorically speaking.'* Allegorizing, as a form of biblical exegesis, involves "the search for secondary and hidden meaning underlying the primary and obvious meaning of a narrative."[218] It is widely recognized as a dangerous form of exegesis, and has often been used arbitrarily and without much connection to the biblical text itself. "Everyone knows that allegorization has been a prevailing vice in biblical exposition."[219] Even Martin Luther, who too often employed the method in his sermons, warned that theological doctrine must not be established on the basis of allegory, but rather illustrated and defended.

John Eadie (1810-76)

> Allegories do not strongly persuade in divinity, but, as certain pictures, they beautify and set out the matter. For if Paul had not proved the righteousness of faith against the righteousness of works by strong and pithy arguments, he should have little prevailed by this allegory. But, because he had fortified his cause before with invincible arguments, taken of experience, of the example of Abraham, the testimonies of Scripture and similitudes; now, in the end of his disputations, he addeth an allegory, to give a beauty to all the rest.[220]

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[218] Fung, Ronald Y. K. *NICNT: The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans; 1988); 217.
[219] Eadie, John *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock; 1998); 363.
[220] Luther, Martin *Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (Philadelphia: Collins; 1840); 498.

John Eadie comments on the apostle's usage of this methodology, "The allegory is here adduced not as a formal or a prominent proof, but as an illustrative argument in favor of what had been already proved."[221]

It is important to note that this allegorizing by Paul in no way diminishes the historical veracity of the events themselves. Indeed, had not the events of Genesis 21 been considered historical by the apostle, the allegory would have little force in aiding his own argument against the Judaizers.

> Paul's starting point is the historical truth of the Genesis narrative. Paul does, however, definitely go beyond the historical to the hidden and underlying meaning. But at the same time he seems to be merely drawing out the spiritual principles underlying the actual events, so that the deeper, spiritual meaning is 'in full harmony with, although additional to, the historical meaning.[222]

It appears that the Sarah-Hagar (and Isaac-Ishmael) paradigm was often used by Jewish scholars in an allegorical sense; it may have been thus used by the 'Judaizers' that Paul was allegedly battling against in his letter to the Galatian churches. In any event, Jewish writers as famous as Josephus and Philo used the allegorical method to interpret the Genesis 21 narrative, and to show that the Jews were the chosen people by virtue of their descent from Abraham *through Sarah*. Thus "the apostle was treading on what would be familiar territory for the Judaizers."[223] But what Paul does with the allegory is the exact opposite of the traditional Jewish treatment; he sets it entirely on its head.

> But if he can refer to an event that was very familiar to teachers, he gives it an interpretation that was devastating. The Jews were in no doubt that they were the children of Sarah, but Paul claims that distinction for men and women of faith, Gentiles though they might be. The Jews he sees as the spiritual children of Hagar.[224]

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[221] Eadie; 360.
[222] Fung; 218.
[223] Morris, Leon *Galatians: Paul's Charter of Christian Freedom* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity; 1996); 144.
[224] *Idem*.

This is worthy of deep consideration. Fung uncovers the deepest meaning of the Genesis 21 narrative as he interprets Paul's allegorical employment of the passage thus, "Here the physical descendants of Sarah become the spiritual descendants of Hagar, while the physical descendants of Hagar, interpreted of Gentiles in general, become the spiritual descendants of Sarah."[225] With this profound contemplation we return to the text of Genesis 21.

Are the things of which Paul writes present in the narrative of the separation of Ishmael from Abraham? On the surface, no. But even in the overall promise narrative there is the strongest indication that, insofar as the covenant is concerned, Abraham will have but one son. This will become explicit in the next chapter, when the patriarch is commanded to take his son, *"his only son, the son whom you love…"* and offer him as a sacrifice to the LORD. There was sufficient information in the text of the Abrahamic narratives for the Jewish nation to know itself to be uniquely called by God, to be God's 'peculiar people.' While it is true that Judaism fell into temptation of considering this uniqueness as on account of their physical descent from Abraham, they did nonetheless recognize the significance of their relationship to him. Their error is truly remarkable, when one considers that two prominent characters within the narrative, who were each *excluded* from the covenant, were also related physically (and directly) to Abraham – Ishmael, and Esau.

The past twenty-five years of Abraham's life have been a lesson in the faithfulness of God toward the fulfillment of His promise. It has also been a powerful lesson on the monergistic nature of both the promise (Genesis 15) and the fruition of that promise (Genesis 16). It was God alone who walked between the separated carcasses of the covenant, thus personally and independently ratifying the covenant He was establishing with Abraham. And the birth of Ishmael was the attempt of Abram and Sarah, but not God, to bring the promise to fruition; an action that God never commanded, never sanctioned, and never

[225] Fung; 220.

accepted. It would be hard for any faithful reader of the narratives to conclude anything but the reality that it was the *promise* that mattered, not biological descent, and that, as in the case of Abraham, it was *belief* in the promise that justified. "Faith and not blood is the bond of genetic union."[226] Thus it has ever been, and while the ancients could not have perceived the fullness of the revelation that was to come in the Seed of Abraham, they had sufficient information to understand that their connection to the patriarch could not rest upon lineal heritage alone.

Abraham's Covenant with Abimelech

Now it came about at that time that Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham, saying, "God is with you in all that you do; now therefore, swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my offspring or with my posterity, but according to the kindness that I have shown to you, you shall show to me and to the land in which you have sojourned." Abraham said, "I swear it."

(21:22-24)

One can feel the abruptness of the transition from the Isaac/Ishmael narrative in the first part of Genesis 21, to the Abraham/Abimelech narrative in the second. This passage seems to be a bit of a detour on the way from Abram's call from Ur to the momentous offering of Isaac on Moriah. Nor does the narrative offer anything remarkable with regard to the history of the covenant. It fits within an Interlude, however, as it once again provides some background color that permits us to know – in case we were in the process of forgetting – that redemptive history was always tied up with world history. Too often believers read the Bible as if it were set in an alternative universe, and miss the many and frequent intersections between the world of redemptive revelation and the world of mankind.

As such, this interchange between Abraham and Abimelech is itself indicative of the faithfulness of God with respect to the promises given. We have not read much *positive* in regard to Abraham's dealings with the world around

[226] Eadie; 361.

him. He went to war against the assembled invading kings (Gen. 14), and acted dishonorably during his sojourn in Egypt and in Gerar (Gen. 12 & 20). But such events were of limited duration, and served to reinforce the characteristic of the patriarch as an alien and sojourner in the land, just passing through, as it were. Here we read of a different aspect to Abraham's dealings with the world, one which portrays the patriarch as an influential force in the region in which he lived. We should be reminded, in reading Chapter 21, of those features of the divine promise that tell of Abraham's anticipated experience. He was called out, and called to be separate; but he was also in the world, and interacted with the world.

If we go back to the beginning, we learn of that aspect of the promise that Abimelech had come to notice in his assessment of Abraham,

Genesis 12:3	**Genesis 21:22-23**
And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.	*Now it came about at that time that Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham, saying, "God is with you in all that you do…*

We have come to expect that the fulfillment of the terms of the divine promise were all future – the inheritance of the land awaits the 'fullness' of the iniquity of the Amorites, the blessing of Abraham to the world awaits the coming Messiah, etc. In this narrative, however, we see that God had already begun to fulfill the promises by granting Abraham great prosperity and, more importantly, *blessing* all those who lived in peaceful fellowship with him. Lot was rescued from the destruction of Sodom, it would seem, solely on the basis of his biological relationship to Abraham. Ishmael is promised a notable future as a nation, because he is the natural son of Abraham. Here, however, we encounter a new principle: the blessings that befall the Gentiles when they live in harmony with God's chosen people. This is, at least, the expectation of Abimelech, and we have already learned that he was a remarkably spiritually sensitive king, for a

Gentile. "Here is a proof of the promise being fulfilled, in a native prince wishing to form a solemn league with Abraham"[227]

The narrative of Abraham and Abimelech was introduced by the placement of the 'sister/wife' narrative in Genesis 20, but it appears from the story line of Chapter 21 that Abimelech had been observing Abraham for some time – seeing the prosperity that God had granted the patriarch, and noticing with some concern the expansion of Abraham's 'business interests.' As Bedouin herdsmen, prosperous regional princes like Abraham would have had a wide region of 'occupation' – owning no land by title deed, yet moving from one pasturage to another as the season and fodder required. In this part of the world, the most necessary feature of any place of temporary dwelling was water, and that required a well. So it is that we find Abraham first mentioning the well that would become a frequent geographical marker in the lives of the next two patriarchs: Beer-sheva.

Abraham is indeed interested in the covenant offered by Abimelech. We have already been introduced to three men who were allies with the patriarch in Hebron (Genesis 14:13), so it is evident that he had no *a priori* aversion to forming closer ties to regional powers like Abimelech. But by this time Abraham was himself powerful enough to set the terms and conditions, and Abimelech's recognition of the divine blessing upon Abraham made the Philistine king amenable to Abraham's terms. As was typical in that age and region, the sticking point was a well.

> *But Abraham complained to Abimelech because of the well of water which the servants of Abimelech had seized. And Abimelech said, "I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, nor did I hear of it until today."* (21:25-26)

What follows is the background story for the founding of the important watering hole known as Beer-sheva. The reason for the name is a matter of

[227] Jamieson, Fausset, & Brown; 171.

debate; it derives either from the seven (*sheva*) sheep that served as Abraham's *bona fides* as the one who dug the well, or from a similar Hebrew word that means 'oath.' In any event, the well was thus named, and became a regular dwelling place for the three patriarchs.

The covenant is concluded between the two princes, and Abimelech returns home. The mention made of Abraham's stay in the region of Beer-sheva has led some to conclude that he had removed to there as his primary dwelling. However, the text indicates the transience of his stay, though it may have lasted for many months, or even a few years, by calling it a 'sojourn.' Beer-sheva was a logical place for an alliance conference between Abraham and Abimelech, being roughly halfway between Hebron and Gerar. There is, however, no reason to conclude that Abraham had relocated from Hebron as his primary place of residence.

What are we to make of the patriarch's covenant with someone clearly outside the covenant scope? Is this not being 'unequally yoked,' as modern believers are so often taught? Or may a believer enter into contracts and covenants with unbelievers without violating that biblical principle?[228] Perhaps we may glean some points of 'biblical business ethics' from the experience of Abraham.

First, it is safe to conclude that God's people were never intended to derive their prosperity as a result of alliances and covenants with the world around them. Abraham in some respects sets the precedent when he refuses to take anything from the hand of the king of Sodom. Though we recognize the moral distinction clearly established in the narrative between the kings of Sodom and of Gerar, it is also important to note that it was Abimelech's recognition of the divine blessing upon Abraham that motivated the former to seek an alliance with the latter. "Above all, he knows that Abraham is under the protection and

[228] Which principle, by the way, did not originate with Paul's letter to the Corinthians, but has been a perpetual characteristic of the 'separatedness' of God's people throughout the ages, properly understood.

blessing of his very powerful God."[229] Abraham did not seek to benefit from an alliance with Abimelech, except in securing peaceful relations with a neighboring power that would facilitate his own pursuit of prosperity.

Another ethical principle we glean from the narrative is that Abraham had justification in defending his own legal rights in the matter of the well he had dug. 'Legal' in that day did not necessarily mean a codified law code, nor did it even imply that Abraham had a written and recorded deed showing ownership of the well. But his word was backed up by a significant offering to Abimelech. In other words, Abraham put his money where his mouth was, and secured the veracity of his claim by a material payment to Abimelech, in whose territory we may surmise Beer-sheva stood (though boundaries were quite fluid in that era). Later this principle of the civil rights of 'sojourners,' as God's people have always been in this world, is refined within the Levitical code to allow lawsuits brought by Israelites against foreigners, but not against fellow countrymen. Perhaps this whole body of Old Testament revelation underlies Paul's admonition to the Corinthians not to take one another to court.

Much more may be said about the concluding of a covenant between the patriarch and the Philistine king, but would be better suited to a study in Biblical Ethics. Suffice it for here to conclude, tentatively, that such relationships between members of the covenant community and members of the world are not categorically forbidden. It is reasonable to expect, however, that the blessings of God on His obedient people would be so manifest that any such agreement or covenant would be sought at the initiative of the one outside the covenant, who recognizes in the believer that *"God is with you in all that you do."*

[229] Von Rad; 236.

Week 15: Denouement

Text Reading: Genesis 22:1 - 24

"In such straits,
the only remedy against despondency is,
to leave the vent to God,
in order that he may open a way for us where there is none."
(John Calvin)

While Moses was sequestered with God atop Mt. Sinai, the children of Israel grew discouraged and desperate, and prevailed upon Aaron to make for the nation a golden calf – a 'god' that they might worship. This Moses' brother did, and the people erupted in ecstatic rioting and celebration. The sound of their revelry reached up into the mountain, and God 'heard' it. The quickness of the people's apostasy caused the wrath of God to burn, and he proposed to Moses a remarkable judgment,

> *The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation."* (Exodus 32:9-10)

This proposal astounded Moses, and he quickly spoke up to dissuade the Lord from carrying through with such a devastating plan, reminding God, as it were, of the divine covenant promise given to the patriarchs,

> *Then Moses entreated the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, 'With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'"* (Exodus 32:11-13)

Moses recognized very clearly that the destruction of the twelve tribes of Israel would be tantamount to the destruction of the Abrahamic Covenant, in

which not only the hope of Israel but the hope of the entire world is contained. Though Israel's lawgiver did not mention this, it is quite reasonable to surmise that he was also considering the lineage of Judah, through which the Promised One would come. Moses was not of Judah but of Levi, and the reconstruction of the nation in him would cancel the promise in which the hope of all the nations rests,

> *The scepter shall not depart from Judah,*
> *Nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,*
> [k]*Until Shiloh comes,*
> *And to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.* (Genesis 49:10)

Moses intervention prevailed, and we read that the Lord *"changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people."* Usually this passage in Exodus 32 is used with reference to the power of prayer, and not infrequently it is taught from this passage the God's mind can be changed by the intercession of fervent prayer. The error of that conclusion is not within the scope of this lesson, as we intend to consider Moses' intervention from a different perspective. But it is still a wrong conclusion.

The prophet Isaiah announces to Hezekiah that this king is to set his house in order, for he will die. Throughout the narrative of Hezekiah's reign, we learn of him that he was a godly ruler, receiving the highest praise accorded to a king in Judah: *"He did right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father David had done."*[230] But when King Hezekiah was informed that he was to die, he did not rejoice that he would thus *"be absent in the body but present with the Lord."* No, he turned his head to the wall and wept. We know that he also prayed as he wept, for we read of the Lord telling Isaiah that He had heard Hezekiah's prayer, and had granted an extension of fifteen years to the king's life. The content of Hezekiah's prayer is not given to us in the narrative of II Kings 20, but we later read that his son, Manasseh, became king at the age of twelve, upon his father's

[230] II Kings 18:3

death. Thus we reason that Hezekiah was childless – or at least son-less – when he was first informed of his imminent demise. The lineage of David would have ended, and with it the prophecy of Shiloh and all hope of the coming Messiah. For Hezekiah, unlike Moses, had the "*word made sure*" through the words of the Davidic Covenant in II Samuel 7, God saying to King David, "*Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever.*"[231]

The common denominator between these two passages is the intention of God to do something which, in the end, He does not do: to destroy the nation of Israel and raise up a people from Moses, and to take the life of King Hezekiah who was at that time without heir. In both instances the protagonists are grieved by the announcement, and we may safely conclude in each case that their hearts were motivated not by fear of being the progenitor of a new race (Moses), or by fear of death (Hezekiah), but rather by a deep understanding of the covenant promises, and the fact that the purpose of God as announced to them, would utterly destroy that covenant from moving forward. And both Moses and Hezekiah knew that if the Abrahamic Covenant did not move forward, all hope for mankind was lost. That Seed in whom all the nations of the world would be blessed and whose lineage had been more and more clearly outlined, would no longer come, and thus the nations could no longer hope in the divine blessing.

But at the very beginning of this lineage, we find another such remarkable divine command that threatens utter ruin upon the hope of all the earth. God commands (actually, He asks) Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering on a mountain that He will show the patriarch. Modern readers cannot feel the intensity of the challenge (the 'trial' or 'test' as it is called in Genesis 22:1) due to the fact that we know how the story comes out, just as we know that God did not destroy Israel and raise up a new nation in Moses, and as we know that he granted Hezekiah sufficient longevity to beget a son and heir and continuation in the Davidic line. But Abraham did not know how things would

[231] II Samuel 7:16

turn out, and Moses carefully presents the narrative in step-by-step detail in order to reinforce this fact. God's command to Abraham would destroy the one in whom all covenant hope had been placed, for "*through Isaac your seed shall be named.*"[232] Yet although his obedience would mean the end of all that he had hoped for, and the extinguishing of that promise upon which he had exercised ever-growing faith, Abraham *did not* intervene or seek to change God's mind. This is perhaps the most remarkable and stunning aspects of the entire narrative, that the patriarch did not do what later Moses would do – veritably argue with the Holy One not to do what He proposed – nor even as Hezekiah would do – pray that the Lord would rescind the writ of death (though, of course, Abraham's silence leaves us in the dark as to his meditations on the way to Moriah). John Calvin writes, "But it may be asked, how, under the guidance of faith, he could be brought to sacrifice his son, seeing that what was proposed to him, was in opposition to that word of God, on which it is necessary for faith to rely."[233]

We learn in the opening verse that the entire sequel was 'a test,' "*Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham.*" But we do not know at this point either the meaning of the test, or the right answer. Was Abraham supposed to protest as Moses would later do, that the death of Isaac was incomprehensible in light of the divine covenant secured by the promise of God? What was Abraham to think with regard to acquiescence in this request, after God had clearly put aside Eliezar of Damascus, Abraham's servant, and Ishmael, Abraham's own son, from inclusion in the covenant, making it crystal clear that the covenant would continue only in Isaac, Sarah's son. We must pause to consider the gravity of what is being asked of the patriarch.

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[232] Genesis 21:12
[233] Calvin; *Commentary on Genesis*; 563.

> For God, as if engaging in personal contest with him, requires the death of the boy, to whose person He himself had annexed the hope of eternal salvation. So that this latter command was, in a certain sense, the destruction of faith.[234]

It is obvious as one progresses through the narrative, that Abraham did make the right decision to obey God implicitly without discussion. His quiet obedience manifests the maturity of his faith, though he cannot have known the outcome of the event. Abraham's silence is reminiscent of his survey of the Cities of the Plain on the day of their destruction. There, too, the patriarch was silent, beholding the righteous judgment of God meted out upon the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah. Here the judgment of God has been announced against Isaac – though by no means on account of any wickedness found in Abraham's son – and the patriarch himself is to be the executioner. But he is convinced that the Judge of all the Earth will do right, and so he silently obeys the divine command.

Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you." **(22:1-2)**

The time setting for the great temptation of Abraham is ambiguous: *"after these things."* Clearly it is after the birth of Isaac, and as the narrative progresses we realize that Abraham's son has grown sufficiently to be able to carry the wood for the burnt offering, and to know enough to enquire after the sacrificial animal. Conjecture is all that has guided commentators – both Jewish and Christian – to speculate as to the age of Isaac at this time, with ages ranging from thirteen to twenty-five to thirty-three. About the only reason one would attempt to determine Isaac's age would be to figure out whether Sarah was still alive when these things occurred. The order of events in the Abrahamic narrative places the death of Sarah after the sacrifice of Isaac, and before Isaac's marriage

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[234] *Ibid.*; 560.

to Rebekah. Sarah does not figure into the temptation narrative; perhaps Abraham did not inform his wife of the Lord's command to sacrifice their son. Be that as it may, it is still best to leave indistinct what Scripture leaves indistinct.

The command of God to Abraham is couched in remarkable terms, though the English translations do not reflect the actual wording used. Verse 2 opens with the Hebrew *na'*, a particle that indicates a formal request, roughly translated by the English 'please.' One lexicon offers the definition, "a primitive particle of incitement and entreaty, which may usually be rendered, 'I pray thee.'"[235] Thus while the verb 'take' is in the imperative – a command – it is introduced by a formal term of entreaty that lessens the intensity of the command, and the overall wording should be rendered, "*Please, take now your son…*" The significance of this particle in verse 2 is to lay the greatest possible stress upon Abraham's response, as we recognize that the compulsion that drives him to obedience is not the force of the command, but rather something from within his own heart.

Despite the terms of inducement – the 'please' from God – the Lord does present the command/request in the starkest possible terms for the patriarch to digest: "*take your son, your only son, the son whom you love…*" In one phrase God reminds Abraham of all the years since his departure from Haran, and the waiting – sometimes patiently, other times not so much – for the fulfillment of the promise of a son. First Lot was slaked off, then Eliezar of Damascus denied participation, and finally Ishmael, the son of Abraham's own loins, is sent away in favor of the patriarch's 'only son' Isaac. "Abraham had to cut himself off from his whole past; now he must give up his whole future."[236]

It is well that Moses informs the reader at the beginning that all that was to follow was 'a test.' He skillfully relieves what would otherwise be unbearable tension in the narrative, while making it plain throughout that Abraham himself

[235] Biblestudytools.com
[236] Von Rad; 239.

could not have known that this was just a test. However, giving away the punch line, as it were, does to a large extent prevent the reader from feeling the intensity of the patriarch's struggle. That, in turn, makes it that much more difficult to recognize the triumph of faith in the (almost)sacrifice of Isaac.

But some might still protest that God does not tempt His children, perhaps quoting from James, "*Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone.*"[237] It is fairly clear from the context of James, however, that the author is talking about temptations to sin, which he categorically denies that the Lord would ever do. Commanding Abraham to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice to Himself cannot be constituted a sin, for the life of every man belongs to the Lord entirely and, in the ancient world, the life of the son belonged to the father. True, the sacrifice of children would later be roundly condemned by God through His prophets, but even in this it is interesting to note that one of the root causes of this condemnation was that the sacrifice of children was a thing *God had not commanded*.

> *Because they have forsaken Me and have made this an alien place and have burned sacrifices in it to other gods, that neither they nor their forefathers nor the kings of Judah had ever known, and because they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent and have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal,* ***a thing which I never commanded or spoke of, nor did it ever enter My mind****…*
>
> (Jeremiah 19:4-5)

It is more reasonable to conclude that what is being tested here in Genesis 22 is not just Abraham, but Abraham's faith and love toward God. Faith, we are instructed, is more valuable than gold and, as such, is to be refined in the fire seven times. And as with any precious metal, there is a final assay performed to confirm the level of quality attained by earlier fires, and to confirm that no more dross remains. This is the nature of God's testing of Abraham, and if one desires

[237] James 1:13

a New Testament passage to pull into Genesis 22 by means of inspired commentary, there is none better than these words from Paul,

> *No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of* ***escape*** *also, so that you will be able to endure it.*
>
> (I Corinthians 10:13)

On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. **(22:4)**

It is both easy and commonplace to find an allusion here to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus on the third day. Suffice it to say, without reading into Scripture more than is found there, that remarkable things in the Old Testament often occur 'on the third day.' There is little reason to provide this information from a geographical point of view, for it is impossible to say just how far Abraham might have traveled in a day. Thus the many attempts to prove his point of departure (Hebron? Beer-sheva?) are futile. One might as well argue in favor of Hebron on account of it being the closest to Moriah, and the fact that Abraham was north of one hundred years of age. But given the fact that he still had many years (and quite few more sons) in him, he very well have made the longer journey in three days, which would favor Beer-sheva as his point of departure. Inconclusive information indeed.

Rather it would be better to see in this statement a pattern that we find in the entire narrative leading up to the (almost)sacrifice of Isaac. That is, the minute, step-by-step narration that provides the reader with each discrete act of Abraham – *"he lifted his eyes…he took the wood…he bound Isaac…"* The vividness of the prose is unique to this passage, and allows the reader to see in his mind's eye the entire event unfold. Even the phrase, *"he lifted his eyes,"* paints the picture of a solemn, even downcast patriarch throughout the journey up to this point. There is essentially no conversation taking place along the way, just contemplative silence into which the reader is invited, not to know what the

patriarch (or, for that matter, his son) was thinking, but rather to consider his *own* thoughts in light of the incredible circumstances of which he reads.

Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together. **(22:7-8)**

This is the only conversation recorded between father and son, and it is remarkable for its brevity. Isaac is here shown to be old enough to understand the mechanics of the burnt offering. Up to this point he may have considered that his father would purchase a lamb or goat (the Hebrew word can mean either animal) in a village along the way. But now they are ascending the mountain range of Moriah, into an unpopulated area where there is little chance of finding an animal for the sacrifice. Or perhaps Isaac has been wondering for the past three days, just what it was that his father was going to offer up in fire to the LORD. Did he have an inkling that it was to be him? If he did, then the overall parallel to the sacrifice of a greater Son is even more powerful. We have reason to believe, from the rest of the narrative, that Isaac may well have surmised what was planned, and willingly submitted to his father in it.

It is Abraham's answer to his son's query that generates the most comment among scholars. Von Rad, for instance, writes, "Actually the answer is ambiguous, but it contains a truth of which Abraham himself is not yet aware."[238] Leon Kass comments after the whole event is unfolded, "Having spoken then (i.e., in verse 8) better than he knew, Abraham now knows – wonder of wonders – how truly he had spoken."[239] Both authors, however, conclude that Abraham spoke without understanding what he was saying. Calvin also considers that Abraham gave no thought to any other sacrifice than that of his son, for in connection with the patriarch's earlier instructions to his servants, "*Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and*

[238] Von Rad; 241.
[239] Kass; 346.

return to you." (v. 5), the Genevan scholar writes, "When…he says that he will return with the boy, he seems not to be free from dissimulation and falsehood."[240]

Yet none of the commentators consider the fact that Abraham is a prophet of God. Certainly we have no indication at all that God informed Abraham of what was to take place, but equally we have no basis either in the Abrahamic narrative or in the fact that the patriarch was also a prophet of God, to conclude that Abraham was simply abandoning the promise to the flames of Isaac's sacrificial pyre. To conclude 'dissimulation and falsehood' on the part of Abraham is to deny the inspired commentary on this passage offered by the author of the epistle to the Hebrews,

> *By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, 'In Isaac your descendants shall be called.' He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type.* (Hebrews 11:17-19)

It is too often assumed that Abraham, in obeying the command/request to sacrifice his son Isaac, had to abandon his hold on the covenant promise that *"in Isaac shall your seed be named."* This conclusion, however, is based on the tenuous foundation of the patriarch's almost complete silence throughout the journey. Furthermore, the one time he does speak he does so with a remarkable statement, *"God will provide for Himself the lamb."* The reflexive pronoun *for Himself* is worthy of consideration. Whereas Abraham's concern (and undoubtedly Isaac's, too) could be addressed with the simple active voice – *God will provide* – Abraham speaks in theocentric terms and adds the pronoun – *God will provide* ***for Himself****...* This whole orientation shows the depths of Abraham's faith, for the event that was transpiring was not about him, nor was it about Isaac, but it was about God. When Abraham might have said, *"God will provide* ***for us*** *a sacrifice to offer to Him"* he instead draws Isaac's attention to both the

[240] Calvin; 567.

Subject and the Object of true worship, "*God will provide **for Himself** a sacrifice for us to offer to Him.*"

In spite of his comment about Abraham's 'dissimulation and falsehood,' Calvin seems to recognize that the silence of the patriarch was not desperation, but rather the deepest form of faith. Calvin writes, "But he was unwilling to measure, by his own understanding, the method of fulfilling the promise, which he knew depended on the incomprehensible power of God."[241] Although John Sailhamer misses the reflexive pronoun, he does nonetheless see the connection between Abraham's answer to his son, and Abraham's deep and mature faith.

> When Abraham finally ends his narrative silence and speaks in his reply to Isaac, for the first time a hint at an answer is given: 'God will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.' Such a reply has not been anticipated within the narrative thus far, but the reply itself anticipates precisely the final outcome of the story ('The Lord will provide'). Thus midway through the narrative the writer allows the final words of the story to appear and to foreshadow the end. The reader is assured thereby both of the outcome of the narrative and the quality of Abraham's faith.[242]

Sailhamer goes on to say that we must not interpret Abraham's words as an empty platitude to calm his sons fears, but rather "in light of the fact that they anticipate the actual outcome of the narrative, they are to be read as a confident expression of his trust in God."[243] This is indeed how the rest of Scripture – especially Hebrews 11 – interprets the narrative. Abraham did not have to let go of the promise in order to obey the call to sacrifice his son. Nor did he have to figure out how it was that God could command both the sacrifice of the covenant seed, and perpetuate the covenant promise. It is sufficient to faith to accept that God knows how He is going to bring His promise to fulfillment, and to know that He will always do so.

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[241] Calvin; 564.
[242] Sailhamer; 178.
[243] *Idem*.

Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." **(22:9-12)**

Here we read the most vivid historical example of that encouragement of Paul to the Corinthians, *"God does not tempt you more than you are able…but with the temptation provides a way of escape…"* Abraham goes to the very edge of obedience, with no indication from his actions that he has any other intent than to slay his son Isaac. The voice of the Angel of Jehovah stops the patriarch, perhaps at the apogee of the arc of the knife. The reader can only conclude that, in Abraham's mind, his only son was dead, and he would have to patiently wait to see how God would miraculously restore Isaac to him. There should be no doubt that Abraham was convinced that this is indeed what God would do, nor that the patriarch doubted the ability of God to restore Isaac from the ashes of the altar. Perhaps Abraham reasoned that Isaac slain and immolated would be no more difficult for God to raise to life, than Isaac yet conceived was to make alive in Sarah's womb. What is deadness to God, either of the womb or of the pyre? *"He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type."*

Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. Abraham called the name of that place The LORD Will Provide, as it is said to this day, "In the mount of the LORD it will be provided." **(22:13-14)**

This is one of the more famous names of God found in the Old Testament, memorized by many a Vacation Bible School student in recent times. A popular children's song links Paul's confidence in Philippians, that the Lord would provide all his needs according to His riches in glory, with this divine name, *Jehovah-Jireh*. This is not good biblical exegesis, however, though the net result is

true: God will provide all our needs. But first we must recognize that the word translated 'provide' in Genesis 22 is does not actually mean 'provide,' but rather it means 'see.' *The Lord will See…and then He will provide.* The sense here is not of human lack, but of divine grace which sees and, in seeing, provides. Second, we must remember *for whom* the Lord is here providing. Yes, he is providing a ram in place of Isaac – so He provides for Isaac. And yes, he provides the ram so that Abraham can fulfill his mission to sacrifice to the Lord on Moriah – so He provides for Abraham. But let us not forget the way in which Abraham himself put the matter: *God will provide* ***for Himself*** *a lamb…*

The name 'Jehovah Jireh' speaks not so much of divine provision for God's people in terms of their material, emotional, and spiritual needs – though these He most certainly does provide. Rather it magnifies divine grace prophetically, that a Holy God will provide *for Himself* the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. So while the children's song speaks a truth, it does so at the danger of trivializing a more powerful truth.

Then the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice." **(22:15-18)**

Here is the denouement: All is wrapped up in this comprehensive reiteration of the Abrahamic Covenant, with aspects of each previous announcement of the covenant culminating in this passage. Abraham's seed will be as "*the stars of the heavens*" and "*as the sand which is on the seashore,*" combining the immensity of the heavens with the infinite minutiae of the earth. Metaphorically, it is a promise beyond all hope or expectation. This is territory we have traveled before, along with Abram/Abraham, but in this final announcement of the covenant to the patriarch, we with him have arrived at the destination. All that remains is Epilogue.

Except for one thing: Was Abraham justified before God because of his willingness to sacrifice his son? In other words, because of his works? This narrative, and this final consummative announcement of the covenant, has been the crux of a debate that has raged in the church ever since Paul wrote his Epistle to the Romans, and James his own letter.

> *Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS," and he was called the friend of God. You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.*
>
> (James 2:21-24)

Did James understand the Abrahamic narratives in the same manner as has been presented in this study? Many have argued that he did not, and that he espoused a works-righteousness illustrated by the patriarch's great display of faith on Mt. Moriah. Luther struggled with the Epistle of James, calling it 'right strawy' and claiming that it presented a gospel different than that of the Apostle Paul. But if one reads James carefully, one can see that he did indeed recognize the progressive nature of developing faith in Abraham. Not only does James allude to Genesis 22, he also quotes from Genesis 15, "*And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.*" This is, of course, the central verse in Paul's treatment of the faith of Abraham – and the doctrine of justification by faith – in the Epistle to the Romans. But James is not conflating two events or times in Abraham's life. Rather, what he is doing is showing that the offering of Isaac on Mt. Moriah was the *fulfillment* of the faith credited to Abraham when he first believed. "*So you can see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of this works, faith was perfected, and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.'*" It was a long journey, this faith working with works. But God was faithful, who took Abraham by the

hand all the way, leading him – and with him, all of his children according to faith – to the perfection of that faith that is credited solely on the basis of faith.

Now it came about after these things, that it was told Abraham, saying, "Behold, Milcah also has borne children to your brother Nahor: Uz his firstborn and Buz his brother and Kemuel the father of Aram and Chesed and Hazo and Pildash and Jidlaph and Bethuel." Bethuel became the father of Rebekah; these eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother. His concubine, whose name was Reumah, also bore Tebah and Gaham and Tahash and Maacah. **(22:20-24)**

This passage reminds us that the chapter divisions of the Bible are not inspired. This is the beginning of the Epilogue in the Abrahamic narratives and, while it does not fit all that well at the beginning of Chapter 23, it fits better there than here at the end of Chapter 22. It is an aside; a parenthetical statement and really, in modern parlance, an 'info-dump.' Moses takes the opportunity here just after the climax of the whole story, to take up a thread he left off many years earlier: the brother of Abraham back in Haran. The purpose of this parenthetical statement is, of course, to introduce the family relations that will provide a wife for Isaac and, later, wives for Jacob.

We are reminded that it was Terah who first left Ur of the Chaldees, Abram traveling at that time with his father. We are reminded of the pattern of '10 and 3' that links the narrative from Seth to Noah with the narrative from Noah to Abram. And we are reminded that Terah was the 'Noah' of the second lineage, and from Terah's people must come those who will continue the covenant line now firmly established in Abraham.

Week 16: Epilogue

Text Reading: Genesis 23:1 – 25:11

"The Holy Land is holy first
because it is the land
where their founding fathers (and mothers) died."
(Leon Kass)

Even though there are two and a half chapters left in the Abrahamic narrative before we come to the patriarch's death, we have passed the climax of the story – the point to which all previous events pointed – and are now in a period of transition. Sarah will pass at the beginning of Chapter 23 and, though her husband will live a further thirty-eight years, the narrative is clearly also passing from Abraham to Isaac. The section of the narrative consisting in Chapter 23:1 to Chapter 25:11 contains two major 'acquisitions' that essentially define the closing years of Abraham's life: (1) the acquisition of the cave of Machpelah as a burial plot for the family of Abraham, and (2) the acquisition of a wife for Isaac, from Abraham's brother's family back in Haran.

There is, of course, additional information that fleshes out the narrative and, in some instances, raises some difficult, though not critical, questions. Chief among these is the announcement of Abraham's remarriage to Keturah and the birth of additional sons to the patriarch (Chapter 25:1-4). As problematic as this passage is, however, it is clear that the facts announced there have no bearing on the covenant which has continued through Isaac alone, just as God had both committed and commanded.

But why Isaac? And by this question we don't mean why Isaac instead of Ishmael. That choice has been abundantly explained in the previous narratives – Isaac being the 'son of the promise' as opposed to Ishmael, the 'son of the flesh.' No, what we mean by 'Why Isaac?' is 'Why not Jacob?' In other words, why do we have a second patriarch inserted here between the two men who are clearly the 'stars' of the patriarchal drama – Abraham and Jacob. It is glaringly obvious

from the most cursory reading of Genesis that far more text is devoted to the first and third of the patriarchs than to the second. It is also obvious that those passages that do deal with Isaac are somewhat nondescript when compared to the narratives of the life and adventures of Abraham and of Jacob/Israel. Indeed, more is said concerning Joseph, who was not a patriarch and whose lineage was not chosen as the genealogy of the Messiah, than is said concerning Isaac. Finally, what is said regarding Isaac is not always flattering and does not indicate a thorough understanding and concern for the issues of the covenant. His wife, Rebekah, will be a stronger player in the drama than he will, and the conflict between his sons will have a more covenant oriented basis and any particular struggle we encounter in the life of Isaac.

So why Isaac? There is certainly the math: with Isaac and then Jacob we have *three* patriarchs, and without question three is an important number in Scripture. However we are not given any basis for concluding that *three* patriarchs, rather than *two*, is somehow of theological significance, and any importance given to the numerology would be pure conjecture. For instance, it is hard to perceive an allegorical connection between the three patriarchs and the three Persons of the Godhead. While Abraham as the father may portray in typological fashion the divine Father, especially in his offering up of 'his only son,' Isaac, it is hard to see a connection between the life of Isaac and the Person of Christ, and still harder to see such between Jacob and the Holy Spirit.

Another possible explanation for the inclusion of Isaac as a patriarch may be literary and historical. It may be that Moses records the life of Isaac in rather bland terms simply because Isaac lived a rather bland life, at least when compared to his father and his son. From a literary and historical point of view, this argues strongly against the 'mythological' interpretation of the patriarchal narratives, as we are presented with a distinctly non-mythological character right in the middle of the threesome. Isaac fights no great battles either with Man or with God, and when we do read of some 'action' in his life, it is hardly the stuff

of legends. The biblical portrayal of the second patriarch is honest and unembellished, giving further proof that Moses had no interest in creating a 'national myth' for the political entity he was leading out of Egypt and into Canaan.

This is not to say that Isaac was less than a bona fide member of the covenant established by God with Abraham, his father. It was promised even before Isaac was born that the covenant would continue in him, and the very same terminology is granted to him from God, though even here the promise is founded upon the relationship of Isaac to his more famous father.

> *Sojourn in this land and I will be with you and bless you, for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath which I swore to your father Abraham. I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; because Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws.* (Genesis 26:3-5)

Leon Kass concludes that the nature of Isaac, portrayed honestly and accurately by the author (Kass, like most moderns, refuses to grant authorship to Moses), is paradigmatic of all sons who are born of famous fathers.

> Every son, though a person in his own right, is, by virtue of being a son, defined in relation to his parents. To be a son *means* to be derivative and dependent, secondary and subordinate – not only physically and generatively, but also psychically, socially, and culturally. To be the son of a great father is to be still more subordinate, at risk of being permanently overshadowed, even when one reaches one's prime…It follows from this analysis that the prime exemplar of the biblical son [i.e., Isaac] will be far from grand or heroic. On the contrary, he should appear at first rather ordinary and unprepossessing.[244]

Kass' psychological and social interpretation of the life of Isaac in terms of the 'father/son' paradigm is less than convincing, and less than helpful in our understanding of the patriarchal narratives. Nevertheless it does serve to

[244] Kass; 353.

illustrate what is apparent from the text of Scripture: Isaac's life pales in comparison to the lives of Abraham before, and Jacob after him. Still, it is an insult to the importance of the covenantal narratives to pass Isaac's life off as just a typical nondescript son of a famous father.

Another theory flows from the theological line taken with regard to the overall structure of the patriarchal narratives. This theory is established on the overarching principle of *separation* that is manifest throughout the Abrahamic narrative, is present in the narrative of Isaac, and becomes prominent again in the life of Jacob. Isaac was not a literary construct, and still less a numerical necessity. He was the historical son of Abraham, the promised son miraculously conceived of parents who, together, were naturally incapable of having children. But the providential purpose of Isaac – as the birth of all children is according to the sovereign providence of God, and especially the birth of Isaac – has to do with one more degree of *separation* to be revealed, the separation of Jacob from Esau.

The call of Abraham was a separation of a man from his people; his departure from Haran was a separation of a man from his father's house; his separation from Lot the final vestige of that particular separation. The divine separation between Ishmael and Isaac was between two men who were half-brothers, the closest degree of association yet within the Abrahamic narratives. But there is to be one more separation even closer: the separation of the twin sons of Isaac while yet in their mother's womb. In a manner of speaking, God providentially places Isaac between Abraham and Jacob for little other reason – covenantally speaking – than that he should be the father of twins, one of whom would be the next son of the covenant, the other to be rejected. This interpretation of the 'purpose' of Isaac's life, however sad it may seem with regard to Isaac himself, at least has the backing of the Apostle Paul, who ascribes immense importance to the *separation* that was to occur between Esau and Jacob,

> *And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, "THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER." Just as it is written, "JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED."*
>
> (Romans 9:10-13)

That God's purpose according to His choice would stand… This is in keeping with the monergistic nature of the covenant as we have seen from the beginning of the patriarchal narratives. God is progressively parsing the lineage of the Promised Seed, and each step of the way He displays His own sovereign purpose as the motive force behind the redemptive revelation. Abraham from Terah; Isaac from Ishmael; and finally Jacob from Esau. One might reason that God had seen something in Abram's first seventy-five years that 'merited' his separation from Terah and from the land of the Chaldeans. One might argue that Ishmael betrayed himself as a mocker and thus disqualified himself from the covenant in favor of Isaac. But no one can maintain that merit had anything to do with the election of Jacob over Esau, as *"the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad."* Thus God's sovereignty in election is most powerfully manifest in the *separation* of Jacob from Esau, for which purpose – again, covenantally speaking – we find their father Isaac 'inserted' between the more famous Abraham and Jacob.

This discussion is, of course, ancillary to the text, for at no point within the text do we read 'Why Isaac?' Nonetheless, as we enter a portion of the Abrahamic narrative that is clearly transitional to the story of Isaac, and we consider how brief that narrative is when compared to the chapters devoted to Abraham and to Jacob (and even to Joseph), it bears reflecting on the *purpose* of Isaac as the second and least noteworthy of the three patriarchs. That Isaac believed in God should not be doubted, for God will continually refer to Himself as the God of Abraham, *Isaac*, and Jacob. Later Isaac's son will refer to Jehovah as 'the Fear of Isaac,' indicating that, in spite of the paucity of descriptive text in

the narrative, the second patriarch did manifest faith in the one true God.[245] And now, in the Epilogue of the Abrahamic narrative, we see the covenantal baton passed to Isaac.

Now Sarah lived one hundred and twenty-seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. Sarah died in Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. **(23:1-2)**

Sarah is the only woman in the Bible for whom her age at death and her burial details are given. She was the matriarch of Israel, the ancestress of the chosen people, so her passing warrants special consideration. In addition, her death marks a *terminus ad quem* in the progress of redemptive history. This means that Sarah's death is a point at which that which was supposed to have happened, must have happened, or it is not going to happen. And that which was supposed to have happened is the birth of the promised seed, who is, of course, Isaac. There can be no conjecture that later sons of Abraham – of which there will be six born of Abraham's third wife, Keturah – might be the fulfillment of the promise, for Sarah is dead and the promised seed was to come specifically through her. Her death in large measure ends the Abrahamic portion of the patriarchal narratives; what transpires from this point until the death of Abraham is transition from the first to the second patriarch.

But Sarah's death also provides the impetus for another important task to be performed by Abraham, the purchase of a burial plot in Canaan, the only deed property the patriarch will own in the 'Promised Land.'

Then Abraham rose from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Heth, saying, "I am a stranger and a sojourner among you; give me a burial site among you that I may bury my dead out of my sight." The sons of Heth answered Abraham, saying to him, "Hear us, my lord, you are a mighty prince among us; bury your dead in the choicest of our graves; none of us will refuse you his grave for burying your dead." So Abraham rose and bowed to the people of the land, the sons of Heth. And he spoke with them, saying, "If it is your wish for me to bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and approach Ephron the son of Zohar for me, that he may give me the cave of Machpelah which he owns, which is at

[245] Genesis 31:42

the end of his field; for the full price let him give it to me in your presence for a burial site." **(23:4-9)**

What follows in this narrative is an interesting, and by all accounts accurate, portrayal of a real estate transaction among the ancient Bedouins; a transaction is not much changed in the modern Middle East. In the ancient world, such dealings were often done in the gates of the main city in a region, where the elders of the town and region would gather to discuss the day's events, to buy and sell cattle and grain, and to adjudicate matters brought before them. Here is where property transfers would be handled 'legally,' as there were no County Courthouses, and no Clerks of Court to record the transfer of deed. Even the flattery that masked cold, hard negotiation is true to the history of this region, and remarkable typical of business transactions among the inhabitants of the Middle East today.

Abraham approaches the leaders of the region of Hebron with abject humility, though it is quickly acknowledged that he is a 'prince of God' among them. These other elders have not missed the evident prosperity of the Semite Abraham. But most scholars do conclude that there had been somewhat of a change in power in the region, with the Hittites gaining the ascendency over the Canaanites with whom Abraham was familiar for a longer time. It is indeterminate whether Abraham knew the man Ephron and utilizes the strict formality of ancient Middle Eastern business etiquette, or if Ephron was so new to both the region and power that Abraham truly needed the intercession of others whom he knew more fully. In either case, the verbal exchange between Ephron and Abraham is timeless in its portrayal of the empty flattery that typifies Arabic business transactions.

Now Ephron was sitting among the sons of Heth; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the sons of Heth; even of all who went in at the gate of his city, saying, "No, my lord, hear me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. In the presence of the sons of my people I give it to you; bury your dead." And Abraham bowed before the people of the land. He spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, "If you will only please listen to me; I will give the price of

the field, accept it from me that I may bury my dead there." Then Ephron answered Abraham, saying to him, "My lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between me and you? So bury your dead." Abraham listened to Ephron; and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, commercial standard.
(23:10-16)

It would be naïve to conclude that Ephron truly wished to give to Abraham a valuable field (notice that Ephron includes the field in with Abraham's request of the cave only). In such transactions, the offer is made as a gift, with full expectation that the recipient would reply with a 'gift' of equal or greater value. Abraham appears to be of the same mind that he was when he encountered the King of Sodom so many years before, and had no intention of this sole possession among the Canaanites being considered by anyone to have been a gift to the patriarch. He responds cooly, 'Just name your price.' This Ephron does, though not directly, as that again would be unthinkable in a Middle Eastern business transaction, "*The value is four hundred shekels, but what is that between me and you?*" Well what it is is a very large sum of money! The flattery pours forth: "*what is that between me and you?*" is a statement of mutual friendship that is greater than the contemptible transactions of business. But Eprhon is also stating his price in unequivocal terms, and inviting no negotiation. Abraham accepts and, with an alacrity that must have both impressed and alarmed those present, weighed out the silver into Ephron's hands. The transaction was ended, the property was 'deeded' to Abraham, and the people of God now have their toehold in the Promised Land.

Abraham's purchase of the field and cave of Machpelah was itself an act of faith in the promise of God that the seed of Abraham would one day take possession of the land. A similar act would be done centuries later by the prophet Jeremiah, who would buy a plot of land in Israel immediately before the remnant of the land was to be carried off into exile in Babylon. Faith speaks assurance in such transactions, that the people would return or, in Abraham's case, would come to possess the land in which he purchased a small cemetery

plot. Here Sarah was buried, and later Abraham would be buried, followed by Isaac and Rebekah, and then Jacob and Leah. The three patriarchs and their wives (well, one of Jacob's wives in any event), secure with their bodies the inheritance once promised by God to Abraham.

> He purchased the cave at Machpelah as a burial place for Sarah, a deed simultaneously of familial and political significance, done not least for Isaac's and his descendants' sake (Abraham will also be buried here, as will Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah); the ground is consecrated as a memorial, helping to keep alive in memory the deeds of the founding mothers and fathers. Ownership of this small plot of earth will be the Children of Israel's sole legal claim in the promised land during their four hundred years of exile in Egypt. Not agriculture but burial is the first title to land. The Holy Land is holy *first* because it is the land where my fathers (and mothers) died.[246]

Thus Abraham makes his first and only acquisition of land in Canaan. The importance of this stake will be reinforced by Jacob's insistence that he be buried in this very cave, and later by Joseph's instructions to those who would attend his own body upon death, that when the children of Israel returned to the Promised Land, they were to disinter his bones and carry them back to the resting place of his fathers. The Cave of Machpelah became the Plymouth Rock of the Israelite nation, for it was here that the possession of the land began.

Now Abraham was old, advanced in age; and the LORD had blessed Abraham in every way. Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his household, who had charge of all that he owned, "Please place your hand under my thigh, and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, but you will go to my country and to my relatives, and take a wife for my son Isaac." **(24:1-4)**

Isaac was thirty-seven years old when his mother died, and we will soon learn that he was forty years old when he married Rebekah. Three years would pass in which the promised son grieved for his mother (*cp*. 24:67). Abraham remained, however, the patriarch and made sure that all arrangements were

[246] Kass; 348.

made for his son prior to his own passing. We are told that Abraham was *"old, advanced in age,"* but we will learn that he still has several decades of life (and apparently six sons) left in him. Still, with Sarah gone the time has come for Isaac to take a wife, and Abraham has no intention for the matter to take care of itself.

We were introduced to the family of Abraham's brother Nahor, another of Terah's sons, now living in the city of Haran whence Abram departed so many years before. The betrothal narrative in Genesis 24 is a vivid reminder of the 'theology of the seed' that has been our guiding hermeneutical principle throughout the Abrahamic narratives. When time comes for Isaac to take a wife, Abraham does not seek a spouse for his son among his neighbors, as his nephew Lot apparently did both for himself and for his daughters in Sodom. Abraham is insistent with his most trusted servant, *"See to it that you do not take a wife for my son from among the inhabitants of this land!"* It is important to note that we have not read any injunction from God that Isaac's wife must not be from the Canaanites, but rather from Abraham's relatives back in Haran. This is something that the patriarch apparently figured out on his own, an extrapolation of the principle of separation that had been so powerfully present throughout his sojourn.

The servant said to him, "Suppose the woman is not willing to follow me to this land; should I take your son back to the land from where you came?" Then Abraham said to him, "Beware that you do not take my son back there! The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me and who swore to me, saying, 'To your descendants I will give this land,' He will send His angel before you, and you will take a wife for my son from there. But if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this my oath; only do not take my son back there." So the servant placed his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master, and swore to him concerning this matter. **(24:5-9)**

Really, the task set before the servant must have appeared impossible: *Do not* take my son back to the land from which I came, and *do not* take for him a wife from the land to which I came. Rather, *you* go back to the haystack from

which I came, and find the needle that God will show you there. It will appear from the sequel that the aged servant was himself acquainted with Abraham's God, and had at least some measure of trust that the Divine Guide would lead him to this needle, for his master's sake. Still, being the loyal and trusted servant of Abraham was not a position that he wanted to risk losing, so he asks his master for a caveat, *"Suppose the woman will not follow me?"* He shows faith that God will lead him to the woman, but doubt that the woman will return with him to Canaan and to Isaac's tent. Abraham justly grants the caveat: if the woman will not follow, then you are released from your vow.

Then the servant took ten camels from the camels of his master, and set out with a variety of good things of his master's in his hand; and he arose and went to Mesopotamia, to the city of Nahor. He made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water at evening time, the time when women go out to draw water. He said, "O LORD, the God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today, and show lovingkindness to my master Abraham. Behold, I am standing by the spring, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water; now may it be that the girl to whom I say, 'Please let down your jar so that I may drink,' and who answers, 'Drink, and I will water your camels also'—may she be the one whom You have appointed for Your servant Isaac; and by this I will know that You have shown lovingkindness to my master." **(24:10-14)**

Abraham intends to make the offer to his brother's family too good to refuse, and we will soon see that the largess that the patriarch sends along with his servant has its intended effect on the son and grandson of Nahor, Bethuel and Laban. What we witness here is somewhat like the admonition attributed to Oliver Cromwell to his troops, "Trust in God, and keep your powder dry." Both Abraham and his servant are trusting in the Lord to direct the servant's steps to the woman God has reserved for Isaac, but they both intend for those steps to be trod in such luxury as to fully convince both the woman and her family that Abraham's son will be a 'good catch.'

We also have our first 'fleece,' a term made famous by the literal fleece used by Gideon to confirm the veracity of the Lord's commands. Here the fleece is situational – if I do this, and the woman does that, then let her be the one I am

looking for. God condescends to answer this request, as it is made believingly and for the sake of Abraham and Isaac. The fleece itself is just the means by which the servant may know that a particular woman is the one for whom he is looking. The prayer is rather, "*O LORD, the God of my master Abraham, please grant me success,* ***and show lovingkindness to my master****.*" The prayer is covenantal; it is made on the basis of God's self-established relationship with Abraham, and it is a plea for continued blessing upon Abraham.

Abraham's servant has some understanding of the covenant relation between his master and Almighty God. He is shown here to pray to *Jehovah* ('the LORD'), rather than simply to *Elohim*. Furthermore, he repeatedly uses the word translated 'lovingkindness' in the New American Standard Bible, *chesed*. By all interpretations, *chesed* is a form of love that is always directed downward, to one beneath the source of that love, and often beneath the merit of that love. The first instance of the term in the Bible is from the mouth of Lot who, when pleading that his escape route from Sodom be shortened to Zoar instead of into the mountains, acknowledges the 'lovingkindness' that had already been shown to him in his rescue from the doomed city. In this instance, however, we might reason that Abraham – God's covenant partner and friend – was deserving that his purpose for finding a wife for his son come to fruition. The servant knows better, perhaps through years of observing Abraham's own journey. He knows that while *'all good gifts come from above, from the Father of Lights,'* (yes, an anachronism; but the God of Abraham is the God of James, unchanging) they are undeserved and to be recognized purely as *chesed*, lovingkindness. The English word 'lovingkindness' was a conjunction first used by the Bible translator Miles Coverdale, who understood the condescending action implied by the Hebrew word *chesed*, and realized that there was at that time no English equivalent.

Miles Coverdale (1488-1569)

Before he had finished speaking, behold, Rebekah who was born to Bethuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor, came out with her jar on her shoulder. The girl was very beautiful, a virgin, and no man had had relations with her; and she went down to the spring and filled her jar and came up. Then the servant ran to meet her, and said, "Please let me drink a little water from your jar." She said, "Drink, my lord"; and she quickly lowered her jar to her hand, and gave him a drink. Now when she had finished giving him a drink, she said, "I will draw also for your camels until they have finished drinking." **(24:15-19)**

Abraham's servant was wise in his choice of a fleece, and not merely pragmatic as to getting both himself and his camels a drink of water. He conditioned his request so as to find a kind and compassionate woman, one who would possess the concern for strangers that is manifest in the Bible as a powerful characteristic of God. It was God, of course, who arranged for Abraham's servant to be at this particular well at the particular time when Rebekah would be drawing water for her family. But wisdom is also displayed by the servant himself, in seeking confirmation of the divine guidance through characteristics of the woman deeper and more lasting than outward appearance. No doubt, however, Abraham's servant was pleased that Rebekah was also *"very beautiful."*

The reader has been re-introduced to the family of Terah in the closing verses of Chapter 22, in what might today be called an 'info dump' regarding the family of Nahor. The brief summary of Nahor's children through both his wife Milcah and his concubine Reumah, was preparatory for this encounter between Abraham's servant and Rebekah, who is descended from Terah through Nahor and Milcah, and not through the concubine. There is the air of aristocratic genealogy here, as Moses is at pains to confirm the pedigree of Isaac's intended bride. But it is not snobbery – indeed, the very 'test' devised by the servant seems to preclude a haughty woman as an acceptable candidate to be his master's son's wife. Rather it is the genealogy of redemption that we have been following since the birth of Seth, and it is the pattern of redemptive genealogy that we first noticed in the family of Noah, and then in the family of Terah. For

just as among the sons of Noah one was cast off, another was blessed, and the third was associated with the blessed one, so here one son of Terah was cast off (Haran, who died before his father), another blessed (Abram/Abraham), and the third associated with the blessed one (Nahor). Indeed, as it was prophesied of Noah's sons that *Japheth would dwell in the tents of Shem* in a figurative sense, so we might say that the descendants of Nahor will literally dwell in the tents of Abraham.

Then the girl ran and told her mother's household about these things. Now Rebekah had a brother whose name was Laban; and Laban ran outside to the man at the spring. When he saw the ring and the bracelets on his sister's wrists, and when he heard the words of Rebekah his sister, saying, "This is what the man said to me," he went to the man; and behold, he was standing by the camels at the spring. And he said, "Come in, blessed of the LORD! Why do you stand outside since I have prepared the house, and a place for the camels?" **(24:28-31)**

We meet Rebekah's brother, Laban, a man we will encounter again more significantly during the narrative of the third patriarch, Jacob. Laban is suitably impressed by the wealth displayed by the servant of his unknown great-uncle Abraham, and hastens to invite the servant to his home. When we encounter Laban as the head of the household, in the Jacobean narrative, we will find him to be a calculating and shrewd man who manipulates Jacob's terms of contract and labor to his own best advantage. Some of that character is glimpsed even here, when he is but the brother of the intended bride, whose father Bethuel is still living.

Once again hospitality is at the center of a patriarchal narrative, as Bethuel and Laban host Abraham's servant as if he were Abraham himself. On the basis of the wealth of presents brought by this man, it is obvious to Rebekah's family that he is the emissary of a mighty prince, into whose family they would be happy to see their daughter/sister placed. As it has uniformly been up to this point, the narrative remains true in this ritual to the culture of the age and land it portrays. As far as the story line has taken us thus far, the family of Nahor –

presumably Nahor himself is no longer alive – is completely unaware of the fortunes of Abraham, and we have only recently read that Abraham is informed of the family of his brother Nahor. Their connection through Terah, however, and the evident prosperity of Abraham, were sufficient to overcome any qualms regarding the proposed match between Rebekah and Isaac.

Then Laban and Bethuel replied, "The matter comes from the LORD; so we cannot speak to you bad or good. Here is Rebekah before you, take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master's son, as the LORD has spoken." **(24:50-51)**

This is quite remarkable, that Laban (who interestingly is mentioned first or alone in the story, rather than Rebekah's father Bethuel) and Bethuel acknowledge the servant's mission and its apparent outcome as being *"from the LORD,"* utilizing the name Jehovah that we have seen used almost exclusively in regard to the Abrahamic covenantal narrative. Part of this is, of course, Moses writing to his own audience. But part of it must also be some vestigial recognition by Abraham's relatives of the one true God who called Abram out from among them so many years before. Later, in the narrative account of Jacob's interaction with Laban, Laban will again invoke the LORD by this covenantal name (*cp.* Gen. 31:49*f*). Yet even this encounter is instigated by Laban's daughter Rachel stealing one of Laan's household idols, indicating that the cadet line of Terah still worshipped idols as they did 'across the River.'

This consideration illustrates another principle of the 'separation' required within the covenant community vis-à-vis the rest of the world, even one's own familial relations. Biblical separation must not only reject and avoid rank paganism, but also syncretism – the blending of multiple 'gods' along with the one true God, Jehovah. Laban, and presumably his father Bethuel and grandfather Nahor, was a pagan still, though perhaps a more refined pagan who acknowledged and paid lip service to Jehovah as the 'God of gods.' In the avoidance of absolute paganism, Abraham ordered that his son not be taken back

to Ur of the Chaldees; in the avoidance of synchretism, he also forbade his servant from taking his son back even to Haran.

Then he and the men who were with him ate and drank and spent the night. When they arose in the morning, he said, "Send me away to my master." But her brother and her mother said, "Let the girl stay with us a few days, say ten; afterward she may go." He said to them, "Do not delay me, since the LORD has prospered my way. Send me away that I may go to my master." And they said, "We will call the girl and consult her wishes." Then they called Rebekah and said to her, "Will you go with this man?" And she said, "I will go." Thus they sent away their sister Rebekah and her nurse with Abraham's servant and his men. **(24:54-59)**

At first glance there is nothing offensive in the family's request that Rebekah stay *'a few days…perhaps ten.'* The request comes from Laban and from Rebekah's mother; again Bethuel is in the background. Abraham's servant, however, is too savvy to fall for the subterfuge, for the reader will later be introduced to the full powers of Laban's cunning and treachery. There is no reason for delay; sentimentality was not a big part of family life in that region or era with regard to the marriage of a daughter. Most likely it was a move on Laban's part to extract even more wealth from the servant (he had already given presents to Rebekah's mother and her brother, Laban; with no mention of presents gifted to Rebekah's father). Here we see the wisdom of Abraham sending his oldest and wisest servant, and not his son Isaac, to secure a wife for the latter. It would seem that Isaac – assuming he was informed of all the transactions of Laban's home – had forgotten the lesson entirely when he sent his own son Jacob back to his brother-in-law's household in search of a wife.

They blessed Rebekah and said to her,
"May you, our sister, become thousands of ten thousands,
And may your descendants possess the gate of those who hate them."
(24:60)

The content of this blessing is remarkable for its similarity to the content of the divine blessing upon Abraham, which will be repeated in favor of Abraham's son, Isaac. Perhaps this was a traditional blessing for a departing

child, who would most likely never be seen again by her family. It touches upon the common themes of the Ancient Near East – a fruitful womb and a secure dwelling. Therefore the similarities between this blessing and the covenantal blessing we have already encountered is, on one level, quite understandable. But it is likely Rebekah's family spoke better than they knew, for the God who alone can guarantee these blessings was with her intended husband, as the son of the man with whom God had made covenant.

Now Isaac had come from going to Beer-lahai-roi; for he was living in the Negev. Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening; and he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, camels were coming. Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac she dismounted from the camel. She said to the servant, "Who is that man walking in the field to meet us?" And the servant said, "He is my master." Then she took her veil and covered herself. The servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and he took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her; thus Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

(24:62-67)

As if to highlight the transition from Abraham to Isaac, we read that the servant did not first return to Abraham's dwelling (Hebron, or perhaps Beer-sheva), but rather went directly to the dwelling of Isaac, near Beer-lahai-roi. That Isaac was dwelling this far south, and in this particular place, is quite remarkable, though it is not apparent n the text just why it is. It is remarkable for the fact that the place was named on account of Hagar's sojourn there, when she fled from her mistress Sarah, being pregnant with Isaac's half-brother Ishmael. This is not where we would expect to find Isaac, but we are given no reason why we do find him here.

Conjecture, along with a bit of 20th Century psychoanalysis, would lead the reader to conclude that Isaac was estranged from his father. This is the conclusion of Leon Kass, which is not surprising. The facts, however, that lead to this conclusion are circumstantial at best. It is true that Isaac's father tried to kill him up at Moriah; but the narrative account of that event portrays Isaac as a submissive victim. It is true – made known by the immediate passage – that

Isaac still grieved over the loss of his mother. This does at least indicate an emotional leaning toward Sarah, though it need not require an emotional estrangement from Abraham. Finally, there appears in the subsequent text to have been some rapprochement with Ishmael, as the two are together in attending to their father in death (with no mention of the sons of Keturah at that point). This relative friendship between the two older sons of Abraham may have either resulted from Isaac's dwelling in Beer-lahai-roi, or may have led to his removing there from Beer-sheva. The data is, as mentioned, inconclusive. Isaac is here, where we might not expect him to be, and is finally granted comfort in regard to the loss of his mother, but the gift of his wife.

Now Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. She bore to him Zimran and Jokshan and Medan and Midian and Ishbak and Shuah. Jokshan became the father of Sheba and Dedan. And the sons of Dedan were Asshurim and Letushim and Leummim. The sons of Midian were Ephah and Epher and Hanoch and Abida and Eldaah. All these were the sons of Keturah. Now Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac; but to the sons of his concubines, Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the east.

(25:1-6)

It is generally assumed that Abraham's marriage to Keturah occurred after the death of Sarah. This is, however, only apparently so due to the placement of this account in our Chapter 25, the account of Sarah's death being found in Chapter 24. There is significant evidence that Abraham's marriage to Keturah occurred while Sarah was still alive. First, we are told in the opening verses of Chapter 24 that Abraham *"was old, well advanced in years,"* and we will be told immediately following this account of the patriarch's sons by Keturah, of Abraham's death at 175 years of age. From verse 1 of the previous chapter to verse 7 of this chapter, there does not seem to be room for six more sons.

Indeed, had this marriage been contracted after Sarah's death, and the sons listed here born to Abraham from that time forth, it would have been a remarkable show of virility, for Abraham was 137 years old when Sarah died, and had only an additional 38 years to live. Still, that is possible. The point that

argues against this marriage to Keturah having occurred after Sarah's death is the fact that she is mentioned again in the same passage as Abraham's concubine (25:6), which clearly refers to Hagar and Keturah. A concubine was considered a wife only in a subordinate sense; typically a man had only one 'wife' in the absolute sense of the term. At least this is true as long as the one wife is alive; afterward the man may legally take another as his wife. This second 'wife' would not be a concubine; she would be his wife in the fullest sense. Though it may be that the record preserves the highest honor for Sarah by calling Keturah a concubine even though the matriarch was dead, it is also quite possible – and perhaps even likely – that Abraham took Keturah as a wife in the secondary sense while his primary wife was still living.

If this were the case, it would shed some light on our finding Abraham spending an increasing amount of time in Beer-sheva rather than Hebron, and may lend additional support to the conjecture of estrangement between Abraham and Isaac.

Be that as it may, the overall discussion does serve to remind us that biblical narrative is not always chronological, and it would indeed make more sense to find Abraham's marriage to Keturah, and the sons borne to him by her, here at the end of the Abrahamic narrative. This is so that we may be assured of the singularity of the relationship between Abraham and Isaac *on account of the covenant of God alone*, and to reject any thought of Abrahamic blessings flowing to any other tribes who might be able to claim biological descent from the patriarch. Moses' justification for including this information is obvious: these sons of Abraham by Keturah had undoubtedly become tribes living in the vicinity of the Promised Land (as we are here told), who also undoubtedly made much of their heritage from the great patriarch. Moses seeks to settle such claims once for all, but reminding us that, while Abraham was a generous father to all of this offspring, the entirety of the inheritance – and along with that, the covenant – went to *"his son, his only son, the son whom he loved, Isaac."*

These are all the years of Abraham's life that he lived, one hundred and seventy-five years. Abraham breathed his last and died in a ripe old age, an old man and satisfied with life; and he was gathered to his people. Then his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre, the field which Abraham purchased from the sons of Heth; there Abraham was buried with Sarah his wife. It came about after the death of Abraham, that God blessed his son Isaac; and Isaac lived by Beer-lahai-roi. **(25:7-11)**

The narrative of the life of Abraham, the first patriarch, the friend of God, is ended.