

## Genesis, Commentaries to Chapter 12

*Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin*  
*a/k/a The Netziv*

**Genesis 11:31. TERAH TOOK HIS SON ABRAM, etc.** Even though the word of God had not yet come to Abram, there had already been some divine awakening within him. From afar, he had become aware of the holiness of the Land. By the age of 75, Abram received the first divine assurance that the land was being given as an outright gift as a part of God's plan already from the time of Creation. Here in verse 31 the Torah tells us that **TERAH TOOK**, even though the principal impetus for leaving Ur had come from Abram. Nevertheless, because Abram was so deeply absorbed with ideas of God and his developing theology and, as a result, had been unable to arrange the journey for himself and his family all on his own, the first lap of the trip had been carried out by his father, who physically transported Abram and his household from Ur.

*Robert Alter*

**1. Go forth from your land ... to the land I will show you.** Abram, a mere figure in a notation of genealogy and migration in the preceding passage, becomes an individual character, and begins the Patriarchal narratives, when he is here addressed by God, though he himself as yet says nothing, responding only by obedience. The name Canaan is never mentioned, and the divine imperative to head out for an unspecified place resembles, as Rashi observes, God's terrible call to Abraham in chapter 22 to sacrifice his son on a mountain God will show him. Rashi also draws a shrewd connection between the triplet here—"your land and your birthplace and your father's house"—with the triplet in chapter 22—"your son, your only one, whom you love." The series in each case focuses the utterance more specifically from one term to the next. Thus, the Hebrew *moledet* almost certainly has its usual sense of "birthplace" and not its occasional sense of "kinfolk," which would turn it into a loose synonym of "father's house" (*beyt'av*, a fixed term for the family social unit). In 11:28, *moledet* appears as part of a genitive construction, *'erets moladeto*, "land of his birth." Here, those two terms are broken out from each other to yield the focusing sequence: land-birthplace-father's house.

**2. you shall be a blessing.** The verb here as vocalized in the Masoretic Text literally means, "Be you a blessing," which makes the Hebrew syntax somewhat problematic. A change in vocalization would yield, "and it [your name] will be a blessing." The Israeli biblical scholar Moshe Weinfeld has aptly noted that after the string of curses that begins with Adam and Eve, human history reaches a turning point with Abraham, as blessings instead of curses are emphatically promised.

**3. those who damn you.** The Masoretic Text uses a singular form, but the plural, attested in several manuscripts and ancient versions, makes better sense as parallelism. The balanced formulation of this and the preceding verse are almost scannable as poetry.

**5. the folk they had bought in Haran.** Slavery was a common institution throughout the ancient Near East. As subsequent stories in Genesis make clear, this was not the sort of chattel slavery later practiced in North America. These slaves had certain limited rights, could be given great responsibility, and were not thought to lose their personhood.

**6. The Canaanite was then in the land.** ...[T]he point of the notation...is to introduce a certain tension with

the immediately following promise that the land will be given to Abram's offspring.

**8. And he pulled up his stakes.** The Hebrew vocabulary (here, the verb *waya'teq*) in this sequence is meticulous in reflecting the procedures of nomadic life. The verb for "journey" in verse 9 also derives from another term for the pulling up of tent stakes, and the progressive form in which it is cast is a precise indication of movement through successive encampments.

**10. And there was a famine in the land.** The puzzling story of the sister-wife occurs three times in Genesis (here, chapter 20, and chapter 26). It is the first instance of type-scene in biblical narrative, in which the writer invokes a fixed sequence of narrative motifs, familiar as a convention to his audience, while pointedly modifying them in keeping with the needs of the immediate narrative context. The Midrash recognized that the tale of going down to Egypt at a time of famine was a foreshadowing of the sojourn in Egypt ("the actions of the fathers are a sign for the sons"). But in contrast to the versions in chapters 20 and 26, here, at the beginning of the whole Patriarchal cycle, the writer goes out of his way to heighten the connections with the Exodus story. Only here is the land of sojourn Egypt and only here is the foreign potentate Pharaoh. Only here does the narrator speak explicitly of "plagues" (though a different term is used in Exodus). Only here is the danger of the husband's death set off by the phrase "you they will let live" attached to the wife, a pointed echo of Exodus 1:22, "Every boy that is born you shall fling into the Nile, and every girl you shall let live." This is also the most compact, and the most archetypal, of the three versions; the other two will elaborate and complicate the basic scheme, each in its own way.

**11. I know.** This is the construal of *yada'ti* according to normative Hebrew grammar. But the *ti* ending could be an archaic second-person singular feminine, and "you know" would make better conversational sense here.

**13. my sister.** ...It is not clear whether the writer means to endorse the peculiar stratagem of the patriarch in any of these three stories.

**17. plagues.** The nature of the afflictions is not spelled out. Rashi's inference of a genital disorder preventing intercourse is not unreasonable. In that case, one might imagine a tense exchange between Pharaoh and Sarai ending in a confession by Sarai of her status as Abram's wife. In the laconic narrative art of the Hebrew writer, this is left as a gap for us to fill in by an indeterminate compound of careful deduction and imaginative reconstruction.

**19. Take her and get out!** "Her" is merely implied in the Hebrew, which gives us three abrupt syllables, two of them accented: *kkh walekh*. There may be an intended counterpoint between the impatient brusqueness of this imperative, *lekh*, and the same imperative, softened by an ethical dative, *lekh lekha*, "go forth" (literally, "go you"), in God's words to Abram that inaugurate the Patriarchal cycle.

### ***Richard Elliott Friedman***

**12:1. Go.** Hebrew *lekh*. Much has been made of the second word in this phrase, *lekha*, which means "for you." No translation quite captures the sense of the Hebrew ("Go you," "Get you," "Go for yourself"). The second element, *lekha* (or *lakhem*), occasionally follows verbs in the Tanach....I believe it is better to use no English term than to use any of the possible equivalents, all of which are clumsy English and do not convey the Hebrew.

**12:1. your land, your birthplace.** But he is in Haran. He has already left Ur of the Chaldeans, which was his land and birthplace. Rashi tries to solve the problem by saying that this means "Go even farther from your

land and birthplace.” Ibn Ezra tries to solve it by saying that it means “God had said [i.e., earlier, back in Ur], ‘Go from your land....’” But these stretch the meaning of the Hebrew beyond what is possible. And besides, Abraham later sends his servant to get a wife for Isaac, saying, “Go to my land and my birthplace” (24:4), and the servant goes to Haran (“to Aram Naharaim, to the city of Nahor,” 24:10; which is identified as Haran, 27:43). On these grounds Ramban rejects Rashi’s and Ibn Ezra’s solutions. Ramban’s own solution, though, falls short as well, requiring that Abraham’s land and birthplace are Haran, not Ur. This is further complicated by the fact that the Abrahamic covenant begins with God saying to Abraham, “I brought you out of Ur” (15:7). The truth is that this is a case in which the contradiction is a result of the fact that the Torah was composed from several sources. In this case, one of its sources had Abraham coming from Ur, and another had him coming from Haran. The aim of this commentary is to deal with the Torah in its final, combined form and not to analyze its sources....Usually, the combination of sources has produced a richer, more complex story in the Torah. But this passage is one of a few instances in which the combination has produced an irreconcilable contradiction. In such cases, it is better to acknowledge the problem than to stretch to make forced interpretations.<sup>1</sup>

**12:1. your land, your birthplace, and your father’s house.** But if he has left his land, then of course he has left his birthplace and his father’s house. This is geographically backwards. Therefore, the point of this order is not geographical. It is emotional. The three steps are arranged in ascending order of difficulty for Abraham. It is hard to leave one’s land, harder if it is where one was born, and harder still to leave one’s family. And where is he to go? To “the land that I’ll show you.” That is, he must leave his homeland without knowing for what he is giving it up. The wording seems designed to make it hard for Abraham. This pattern of testing will be repeated when he is commanded to sacrifice Isaac, thus: “Take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac.” And where is he to sacrifice him? “On one of the mountains that I’ll say to you.” (See the comment on 22:2.)

**12:3. all the families of the earth will be blessed through you.** The Tanach is so focused on the people of Israel that one can underestimate the overwhelming significance of its opening section. The first eleven chapters (Parashat Bereshit and Parashat Noach) are about the relationship between God and the entire human community. That relationship does not go well, and after ten generations the deity decides to destroy the mass and start over with a single virtuous man’s family. But it turns out that choosing a virtuous individual does not guarantee that this individual’s descendants will be virtuous, as well. Another ten generations pass, and humans in general are not a planet-full of Noahs. So once again the focus narrows to a single virtuous person, Abraham.

We must keep in mind what has happened up to this point when we read this, or else we will lose the significance of what is happening here. Wiping out everyone but a virtuous person did not work. So God leaves the species alive, but chooses an individual who will produce a family that will ultimately bring blessing to all the families of the earth.

To make sure we get it, it is the final point of God’s first revelation to Abraham: Go to the land I’ll show you. I’ll make you a big nation. I’ll bless you. “And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:3).

---

<sup>1</sup> For another view, see Sarna, “to the land,” page 11 below.

To make sure we do not forget it, it is repeated four times—and always in crucial moments of revelation: during the appearance of the three visitors to Abraham (Gen 18:17-18); in the blessing following the near-sacrifice of Isaac (22:16-18); in God’s first appearance to Isaac (26:2-4); and in Jacob’s first encounter with God in the dream of the ladder at Beth-El (28:10-14).

It is important. In some way, at some time, the result of the divine choice of Abraham is supposed to be some good for all humankind. We are never told what this good is supposed to be. Is it that Abraham’s descendants are supposed to bring blessing by being “a light to the nations”—setting an example, showing how a community can live: caring for one another, not cheating one another, not enslaving one another, not lending to each other for profit, and so on and on? Or is it that they are to bring blessing by doing things that benefit the species: inventions, cures, literature, music, learning? It does not say. But at minimum it must mean that the people of Israel do not live alone or apart. Their destiny—our destiny—whatever it is, must be bound up in the destiny of all humankind.

This adds a dimension, an additional layer of significance, to every story that will follow in the Torah. When Abraham travels to Canaan, we might imagine it from a God’s-eye view above the earth: the tiny movement of a man and his family along the globe is a first step in a process that is to bring benefit for all the earth. When Abraham travels to Egypt, this is the first in a series of encounters that he and his descendants will have with the peoples of the world. When he and Lot are forced to part, this is a step in distinguishing his destiny from that of the families of his brothers Haran and Nahor, though he and his descendants will continue to interact with them.

When he joins in a battle among kings in order to rescue Lot (Genesis 14), he is being drawn into world events, and it is another first step, an anticipation of all the times that his descendants, the people of Israel, will be drawn into contact and interaction with nations. When Abraham covenants with God (Genesis 15 and 17) the ceremony includes specific references to Ur of the Chaldees, the land from which Abraham has come; to Egypt, the land where his descendants will be enslaved; and to ten peoples of the land that Abraham is promised. It also includes the announcement of his coming son Isaac, the key to the fulfillment of the destiny to be a blessing to all the families of the earth—as will be confirmed explicitly following the Akedah. And in between the two chapters concerning the Abrahamc covenant comes the story of the birth of Abraham’s son Ishmael, whose descendants, the Ishmaelites, will be among Israel’s related neighbors.

All of these episodes are conveying the formative stages of a development that begins with that narrowing of attention to Abraham. The interpretive point is that we must understand every section of the Torah with awareness of what has preceded it and what will come after it. The social and moral point is that Abraham’s descendants are not to live by themselves or only for themselves. Whether dealing with non-Jews who live in Israel or dealing with non-Jews who are their neighbors in the countries in which they reside, the Jews are a community that connects its birth with a prediction (?), a promise (?), an obligation (?), a destiny (?) to be a blessing to them all.

**12:3. will be blessed through you.** Rashi takes the plain meaning of this phrase to mean that non-Israelites will bless their children with words such as “May you be like Abraham.” His proof for this reading is the wording of Jacob’s blessing of his grandsons Ephraim and Manasseh: “Israel will bless with you, saying: ‘May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh’” (Gen. 48:20). But that passage uses an active form of the verb..., whereas all the occurrences of this phrase in terms of the nations being blessed use forms that are passive or reflexive..., which is a different matter.

If we take the meaning as passive, then it is as I have translated it here: “the earth’s families will be blessed through you.” If we take it as reflexive, then it can mean “they will bless themselves through you,” which is Rashi’s understanding; but a reflexive can also mean “they will get blessing *through* you.” Interpreters are split on this. I believe that context settles the question. The issue in the story until now has been the course of relations between God and all the families of the earth. Now God makes a special bond with Abraham’s family and lets him know that this is for the eventual benefit of all families. (See the preceding comment.)

**12:4. Abram went as YHWH had spoken to him.** Traditionally the emphasis has been on faith as the mark of Abraham’s character. But the narrative conveys far more that the mark of Abraham is obedience. Leave your land: “And Abram went.” Sacrifice your son: “And Abram got up early.” The tests that Abraham undergoes are not necessarily tests of faith but are certainly tests of obedience. At this stage in relations between God and humans, God appears to single out a human who will do what he is told. This will change gradually in the Tanach, as humans grow and mature and God cedes more responsibility for the world to them. But for now, obedience is sought.

**12:8. Beth-El to the west and Ai to the east.** At this site, Abram invokes the name YHWH for the first time, and he builds an altar there. Later Abraham returns to this site and invokes the divine name again (13:3). No explanation of the significance of this place between the two cities—Beth-El and Ai—is given in the Torah. But we learn in the book of Joshua that, many generations later, God delivers Ai into the Israelites’ hands by means of an ambush, and it takes place “between Beth-El and Ai, to the west of Ai” (Josh 8:9,12; c f. 12:9). This appears to be a case of “the merit of the fathers.” That is, the pious acts of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob have consequences for their descendants. In this case, the Israelites are successful in the age of settlement of the land thanks to what Abraham had done on the very spot centuries earlier. There will be enough cases of this phenomenon to establish it as a major theme and message of the Torah: that the good acts that we do have implications for the lives of our children and many generations thereafter: as an example, as a source of strength, and in subtle ways that are impossible to calculate or foresee. This phenomenon of the merit of the parents also acts as a preparation for and a balance to the opposite phenomenon that will be developed in the Torah later: that our sins are visited on the lives of our children and descendants as well.

**12:11-13. Here, I know.** Abraham’s words to Sarah contain the first two occurrences of the Hebrew word *na*. It is sometimes rendered “now” in English and sometimes rendered “please.” But neither is quite right. It is an untranslatable particle that is a sign of polite speech. Its most striking occurrence is in God’s words to Abraham in the story of the binding of Isaac: “Take *na* your son... and offer him” (Gen 22:2). I do not translate it with any English word, because it is closer to the Hebrew to use no word than to use such words as “please” or “now.”

**12:13. Say you’re my sister ... and I’ll stay alive.** All commentators have agonized over this. Abraham constructs a lie and puts Sarah in a compromising position. This may mean that he thinks that he simply has no real choice: it is either lie or die. Or it may convey that Abraham—like other biblical heroes—is not perfect. We cannot know. In either of these cases, he cannot be faulted for choosing to put Sarah in a compromising position, because, in his understanding, Sarah would be taken either way. The concern is that, without the lie, they would also kill him. (In fact..., [t]here is no evidence in the Bible that the Egyptians or anyone else ever did what Abraham fears they would do. Here and in two other cases in which Abraham and his son Isaac claim that their wives are their sisters, the Egyptian and Philistine kings send the couple away when they find out that she is his wife.)

**12:13. my sister.** For a while it was common to cite tablets from Nuzi as evidence that there was a Near Eastern practice of adopting one's wife as a sister. But the Nuzi case involved a single family, and scholars recently have questioned whether it is justified to make so much of it. Abraham's actions here (and in Genesis 20; and Isaac's actions in Genesis 26) are treated as an unusual case. They require no Near Eastern legal precedent.

*W. Gunther Plaut*

### **The Line of Terah: Abraham, continued**

The book of Genesis now enters a new phase by moving from myth toward history. Unlike Adam, and Eve, Shem, or Noah, who were the symbols or legendary standardbearers of primeval memories and traditions, the spotlight narrows to focus on identifiable persons at a certain time. They are Abram and his wife Sarai, who have been called the major historical figures in the book. We reach this conclusion because of the nature of their biographies and because many details and references are corroborated by other sources—even though so far none has been found to mention them by name. [The Ebla discoveries have not as yet provided any unambiguous evidence to the contrary.] This is not surprising, for in their day Abram was not the great and commanding figure that he was to become in the light of later history. This absence of extrabiblical references makes it difficult to date Abram and Sarai precisely, a difficulty we encounter with biblical figures until Moses. Various elements in the ancestral narratives seem to correspond to different periods; from the old Babylonian (19th century B.C.E.) to the Hurrian (15th century B.C.E.) to the Amarna age (14th century B.C.E.). Our data are not precise enough for a definite decision in favor of any one school of thought.

We have a good deal of information about the political, social, and religious life of the Mesopotamian lands where the Abram/Sarai cycle had its beginnings. Documents and archeological evidence tell us that the culture of this area flowered during the second millennium B.C.E. Science, law and social institutions were highly developed. We do not know the particular circumstances that caused Abram's father, Terah, to leave Ur and to settle in Haran, nor do we know his occupation. Of Abram we do know that he was a seminomad with cattle, and we may assume that this was his ancestors' way of life, as well, since in ancient days the sons usually followed in the footsteps of their fathers. They were not Bedouin on camels, like the Midianites, but rather seminomads with small cattle whose movements between the steppe and tilled areas were determined by the needs of their animals and by their relationships with the permanent population.

A degree of settledness is not at all incompatible with their nomadic existence. Cities do attract them, but not to settle in them by force, which would at once compel them to give up their nomadic life as shepherds; but they attract them rather because of their character as cultural centers—primarily therefore for reasons of commerce and connubium [legal marriage].

Calling Abram and Sarai "historical" does not mean that everything the book of Genesis says about them is history in the accepted sense of the word. Our text was written many centuries after they lived, and the intervening ages developed different traditions about them. There is a good deal of what may be called legendary embellishment, which, along with interpretive material, was added to the basic tradition in the course of time. Together these elements came to assume the form that we now have before us.

But it is not so important to fix their era precisely or to determine which of the stories about them are history and which are legendary. What is important is their role as the ancestors of the nation. While the authors of the Torah were concerned with history as the recounting of facts, it was the *meaning* of history that was their primary focus, the account of a spiritual message born of the continuing encounter between God and descendants of the first patriarch and matriarch. *The Torah does not purpose to teach antiquities as such, but to give religious instruction.*

The Torah does not depict Abram as the founder of a new religion. On the contrary, as Yehezkel Kaufmann has shown, in Genesis primeval humankind from Adam on appears to have been monotheistic. Abram was “a prince of God” who kept the faith in the one God pure and bequeathed it to his descendants, setting them aside from a world that had become idolatrous. According to Kaufmann, this biblical view contrasts, however, with what we know of the history of religion. Monotheism in the narrower sense has its origins not with Abram but with Moses. The latter is a fighter for Adonai, the former a man of unusual piety and moral principles. A different view sees Abraham and Moses as “monolatrous” (meaning, adherence to one god without denying the existence of other gods), arguing that not until the Hebrew prophets did monotheism arise.

As the sidrah opens, Abram and Sarai’s family is sojourning in Haran, located in northwestern Mesopotamia. The name of this city means “highway” or “crossroads.” Now God is about to speak to Abram at the “crossroads” of his life.

## **THE CALL OF ABRAM (12:1-12:9)**

### ***The Call***

Did God in fact speak to Abram and make the promise reported in this chapter? To the biblical age and to believers today, the matter was and is clear: God did speak, and God’s relationship to Abram’s children and to the land of Canaan was secured by the divine promise. Many interpreters, however, would understand God’s challenge as something Abram believed he had heard and that consequently he acted in accordance with this belief.

The issue, of course, is not subject to objective verification. Those who cannot accept the possibility of God’s communicating directly with us will not be convinced by the biblical or any other report. But they will be able to agree that Abram was indeed impelled by a voice he identified as the voice of God, an instance of “internal” history. Abram acted on his comprehension of the Divine, and his descendants appropriated his experience and made it their own.

### ***The Choice***

Abram is an old man when he is called by God. Why did God choose a man so advanced in age, and why him at all? The text is silent on this matter,<sup>2</sup> but two divergent interpretations have been suggested.

The first view maintains that we cannot know God’s reasons, which may appear arbitrary by human standards. Hence the Bible says nothing about Abram’s righteousness, though it commented

---

<sup>2</sup> Scripture does not begin by reciting Abraham’s merit, in order to indicate that the choice was a divine mystery and by God’s will alone—a choice that would never be dissolved or denied. Israel will always remain the “holy seed,” for though Israel sins it remains Israel.

on Noah's. Abram, through no merit of his own, is the vessel, the recipient of God's grace. This reasoning has been favored by Christian interpreters of the Bible, although it has had some Jewish supporters, as well .

The second interpretation says that Abram, like Noah before him, deserved to be chosen. Just as Noah stood out as a uniquely righteous and moral man in his time, Abram possessed and demonstrated qualities that caused God to single him out also. This approach, which has generally been favored by Jewish tradition, pictures Abram from his earliest youth in search of God. To put it differently: Abram found God because of an original intuition. Thus, when God addressed the adult Abram, it was in fact in response to his earlier dedication and searching; God reacted to the man's merits.

The Torah at times seems to support the former and at times the latter view. But both approaches together appear to offer the best answer: we need to be addressed by God, and God needs us who are capable of responding. It is a mutual relationship. The text begins with the divine urging, "Go forth!" It is couched as a demand but, like all divine demands, it implies a question: "Are you ready to do My will?" Abram's "Yes" is therefore his human choice, as God's address to him is the divine choice. Both find each other ready; Abram is open to God's desire and God opens the future to Abram.

### ***The Challenge***

God's challenge to Abram has a progressive sequence: "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house." This is more poetry than geographic information. It emphasizes the difficulties of the challenge that Abram is about to accept. It is difficult to leave one's land and to be an unprotected wanderer abroad; it is even more difficult to abjure all that is most dear in one's accustomed house; it is most difficult of all to reject one's parental values and standards. The passage makes it clear that God's demand represents a severe trial of faith for Abram, the first of several fundamental choices that he will have to make in his life.

### ***Blessing and Curse***

Few biblical dicta have been more clearly reflected in history than the statement that those who bless Israel will be blessed and those who curse it will be cursed, or that those who are blessed bless Israel and those who are cursed curse Israel. The decline of a nation can often be clearly related to the way it has treated the Jew, and its prosperity stands in direct proportion to its sense of equity and human dignity. For if "this people Israel" does rest at the fulcrum of spiritual history, its condition must be essential to the welfare of its environment. Enough historical evidence can be advanced—from the appearance of the Prophets to the events of the Holocaust—to make a persuasive case for the archetypal significance of Jewish existence in the world, a significance that Jews themselves have considered central ever since their ancestral days.

To be sure, the world has but rarely given credence to this view. It has not usually seen the Jews as a "great nation," typifying humanity's highest and noblest aspirations. Christians and Muslims have exalted Abram/Abraham as their spiritual father and at the same time have denied validity to the religious quest of the Jews. The latter, however, have stoutly maintained—through ancient, medieval, and modern persecutions—that the blessing issued to Abram has not been abrogated and that it is more important for the children of Abram to be worthy of it than that others accord them recognition.



## ***You Are My Sister***

Abram instructed his wife to tell the Egyptians that she was his sister. She was to say nothing of their marriage. This raises a number of historical as well as moral questions.

There is evidence that Sarai was indeed Abram's sister. In the second version of the story, we learn that although the two had different mothers, they shared the same father (Gen. 20:12). It is possible that this latter notation reflects a stage of civilization in which descent was traced through the mother<sup>3</sup>, and marriages between offspring of the same father (but not the same mother) were permissible. Hence, according to this assumption, when Abram instructed Sarai to say she was his sister, he based his request on a real relationship.

It has also been suggested that the word "sister" might have had yet another meaning. Even as in many languages today "sister" can mean "nun" or "nurse," in Abram's time "sister" was also a legal term, which signified that a person like Abram had adopted his wife as his sister, in order to secure for her the familial inheritance. But this theory (which our earlier edition supported) has been shown to be in error and is no longer held by regnant scholarly opinion.

Whatever the early context, the biblical text shows us how Abram's action caused Pharaoh, who did not know that Sarai was married, to take her into his house. Some commentators excuse Abram's behavior by saying that his ruse was meant to bid for time, until the famine in Canaan would be ended and he could take his wife and leave Egypt. Others frankly disapprove and note that Abram could not reply to Pharaoh's reprimand because the latter's generosity had left the patriarch in the rather embarrassing situation of having lied and having been rewarded for it.

Abram's behavior raises still another question. A man can be judged guilty when he has a choice—but what choices are open to a man who, like Abram, believes he is faced with mortal danger? What could Abram have done, given the knowledge of the prospects available to him? The text, as it does so often, merely states the problem, leaving it to the reader to ponder it further.

Jewish teaching has generally held that, even under duress, no man may intentionally kill or commit a sexual crime on an innocent person. The application of this principle often poses agonizing questions that can be decided only within a given context. (The trials for war crimes after World War II essentially attempted to define the limits of a person's right to say, "I had no choice.") Since both Sarai and Pharaoh were put in jeopardy by Abram, the proper judgment would seem to support Nachmanides' comment that it was a great, though inadvertent, sin, for Abram should have trusted God to save him. The text does not tell us whether Sarai was indeed violated, while the parallel tale that involves Abimelech instead of Pharaoh (Gen. 20:4, 6) tells us that nothing untoward happened.

Interestingly, one ancient source surmises that it was not Abram but Sarai who hoped to deceive Pharaoh, for she saw it as the only way to save Abram's life.

---

<sup>3</sup> This system of family relations is called matronymic—in contrast to patronymic, which considers children born of the same father as members of the family. Traces of a matronymic society appear in various parts of the Bible; for example, it is usually the mothers who name the children; descent is at times traced through mothers rather than fathers; a marriage between Amnon and Tamar is permissible even though they have the same father (II Sam. 13:13).

## ***The Promised Land***

We can hardly overemphasize the importance of those biblical passages that... state that God gave Canaan to Abram and his descendants forever. From these traditions and memories, amplified by centuries of sacred sentiment, grew a unique relationship between a people and a land. Some commentators deny the Abrahamic antiquity of the tradition and claim that it arose in later ages to give the military conquest of the land by Joshua an *ex post facto* religious legitimation. Even if this were so, it would emphasize that for Abram's descendants military acquisition and physical possession—sufficient for all other nations' claims—were not the core of their relationship to the land. For them Canaan, Palestine, Zion, Israel, by whatever name it was known, was linked to the will and promise of God, and hence it was a Holy and Promised Land, as it was later to be called.

To someone who believes that God did indeed will the land to Abram's people, the Jews' subsequent claim to it is beyond dispute. The claim has total force, encompassing legal and moral rights. But the matter should be left open as a question of faith, taking into account that for millennia Jews have believed that their relationship to the land had the sanction of God. Thus their claim obtained a spiritual basis nurtured in thousands of years of possession and loss, presence and absence, reality and memory. To be sure, the people survived without the land and the land without the people—but somehow God and Torah entered into this relationship and gave it a special stamp.

To the Jew, therefore, Zion has been more than a place of pilgrimage or a collection of ancestral sites. It has been both sacred dream and holy potential, the place where God's kingdom on earth would first emerge. Jews have steadfastly believed that it is God's will that they possess the land and that they possess it in justice for God casts out of this land those who defile it. The Amorites lost possession because of their sinfulness, and Israel itself was warned always to be heedful of this possibility (Gen. 15:16; Lev. 18:24; Deut. 9:5). Only a community of righteousness would match the dreams and prayers centered on this small strip of earth: "Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and the repentant people by righteousness" (Isaiah 1:27).

In the course of centuries, and especially in, modern times, many Jews came to feel that God's role no longer needed to be considered in their relationship to the land. They were satisfied that history had forged an indissoluble bond between land and people and that as the homeland and the cultural and political center of Jewry, it remained the focus of the age-old dreams. Thus, religion and history became intertwined for Zion's children: Believers and nonbelievers alike took the dream to heart in their own way and made it the object of their hopes.

***Nahum M. Sarna***

### **God's Election of Abraham (12:1–13:18)**

**Lekh Lekha** The story of Abraham opens without an identifying formula or preliminary observation of the type that introduces the Noah narrative. The patriarch bursts upon the scene of history with astounding suddenness. The first 75 years of his life are passed over in total silence. God's call comes in an instant, without forewarning or preparation. It is brief and compelling in its demands, and Abram's immediate response marks the true beginning of his life. The momentous events unfold with startling rapidity, and any introductory embellishment could only have a diminishing effect.

## THE DIVINE CALL AND THE PROMISES (vv. 1–3)

**1. the Lord said to Abram** The divine silence that persisted for ten generations is shattered. The voice that first set Creation in motion and that, when last heard by man, brought a message of hope and blessing to the human race (9:8-17) resounds once more. This time it is at Haran, where, for some unexplained reason, the intended migration of Terah and family from Ur to Canaan had come to a halt.

**Go forth** Hebrew *lekh lekha*. The preposition *l* gives the verb *h-l-k*, “to walk, go,” the sense of “separating, taking leave of.”

**your native land** Rather, “the land of your kinsmen.” The reference is not to Ur, as in 11:28, but to Haran, precisely as in 24:4.

The enormity of God’s demand and the agonizing nature of the decision to be made are effectively conveyed through the cluster of terms arranged in ascending order according to the severity of the sacrifice involved: country, extended family, nuclear family.

**your father’s house** Terah lived on another 60 years after Abram departed from Haran, as is clear from 11:26, 32 and 12:4.

**to the land** It is unclear whether Abram knew from the outset the identity of the promised land. It is possible that he continued the westward migration that his father had interrupted (11:31) and arrived in Canaan unaware that he had reached his goal until so informed by God (12:7). Alternatively, God may have revealed the destination as soon as Abram accepted the call. One way or the other, God’s word transformed the trek into a wholly new venture, now under divine guidance and purpose, completely disengaged from the earlier undertaking. The original segment of the journey from Ur to Haran could henceforth be viewed from a different perspective and also be seen as part of God’s scheme of history, so that it is possible to speak of God having brought Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans, as in Genesis 15:7 and Nehemiah 9:7, even though the call came in Haran.

**2.** God’s call is accompanied by a comprehensive set of promises that contain seven elements. These are:

**(i) I will make of you a great nation** That is, great in number and significance. The nature of the promise—that it could not be realized in the lifetime of the recipient because of Sarai’s childlessness and the couple’s advanced age—should all have combined to strain credulity to the breaking point. The magnitude of Abram’s act of faith in accepting the divine word is thus implicit in the narrative. Over a thousand years later, it is invoked in a prophetic oration as a challenge to an Israel then plunged into despair and disbelief: “Look back to Abraham your father / And to Sarah who brought you forth. / For he was only one when I called him, / But I blessed him and made him many” (Isa. 51:2).

**(ii) I will bless you** You will enjoy material prosperity. 4

**(iii) I will make your name great** In the ancient Near East, the name was not merely a convenient designation, but an expression of the very essence of being. Hence, this promise means not only that Abraham will acquire fame, but also that he will be highly esteemed as a man of superior character.

**(iv) you shall be a blessing** As a consequence, you will serve as the standard by which a blessing is invoked. 5

**3. (v) I will bless those who bless you** Those who wish you well and who demonstrate solidarity with you will enjoy God’s blessing of well-being.

**(vi) And curse him that curses you** He who mistreats you will inevitably incur misfortune. The English translation obscures the distinction between the two different Hebrew verbs employed here. The verb *k-l-l*, referring to the offender's action, means "to disparage, abuse, cause harm"; *'-r-r*, referring to God's response, has the much stronger connotation of "to place under a ban, to deprive of the benefits of divine providence," and it is the only term employed in curse formulas. Its power can be gauged by its use in the great covenant-affirming ceremony enjoined in Deuteronomy 27. In other words, because the patriarch will be an unprotected stranger in an alien land, he will have particular need of God's providential care, and whoever maltreats him will be punished with exceptional severity. It should be noted that the Hebrew has a contrast in number between "those who bless" and "he that curses." Radak and others explain this to mean that Abram's detractors will be few.

**(vii) And all the families of the earth / Shall bless themselves by you** This rendering understands Hebrew *ve-nivrekhu* as reflexive. People will take your own good fortune as the desired measure when invoking a blessing on themselves. A more likely translation of the verb is as a passive: "shall be blessed through—because of—you." God's promises to Abram would then proceed in three stages from the particular to the universal: a blessing on Abram personally, a blessing (or curse) on those with whom he interacts, a blessing on the entire human race.

These promises to Abram, given in Haran, make no mention of a gift of land, perhaps so as not to detract from the pure, disinterested act of faith involved in heeding the simple command, "Go forth!"

## **ABRAM'S RESPONSE (vv. 4–5)**

In silent, unwavering obedience to the divine will, "as the Lord had commanded him," the patriarch picks himself up and goes forth, accepting his new destiny in perfect faith.

**4. Lot went with him He agreed to go.** The mention of Lot prepares the reader for a subsequent episode (chap. 13).

**seventy-five years old** Recording the age of the patriarch at crucial moments of his life is a characteristic feature of the narrative.

**5. his brother's son Lot** The kinship description explains his presence in Abram's entourage. The oldest uncle assumed the guardianship of the child of his dead brother, which is clear in 14:12.

**wealth. . . persons** These are mentioned in anticipation of the ensuing narrative (v. 16). Abram's affluence does not derive from Pharaoh's gift.

**5. they set out. . . they arrived** The verse duplicates the phraseology and structure of 11:31. They make a fresh start, and this time they arrive in Canaan. Although the text does not report the precise details of the route from Haran to Shechem, all available possibilities would have taken them through or near some of the great urban centers of the day. Since Haran lay on the banks of the Balikh River, a tributary of the Euphrates, they most likely traveled southward along the Balikh Valley in order to reach the great east-west arterial road that led from Ur, Babylon, and Accad to Mari, where it branched into two. They then could either have taken the upper branch, leading west to Aleppo, and then veered south past Qatna and Damascus, or they could have continued southward to the oasis of Tadmor (Palmyra) on the lower branch and then turned southwestward along the road to Damascus. Either way, they could have continued on to Hazor, a major commercial and military center, strategically placed in Upper Galilee at the junction of

ancient and important roads leading to some of the main cities of Canaan. The narrative is silent concerning the route and the incidents on the journey in order to avoid diverting attention from the primary theme, which is the entry into the land and the first theophany, or divine revelation, that the patriarch experiences.

## **ABRAM IN THE LAND (vv. 6–9)**

Abram does not stop at Hazor but continues his wanderings until he arrives at Shechem, the true physical center of the country and one of the important cities in the north central mountain region. From here he could follow the water-parting route that led through the hill country to Shiloh, Bethel, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron, and Beer-sheba.

Abram and the other patriarchs, in their pastoral migrations, generally avoided the well-inhabited areas in the northern part of Canaan and the coastal plain. They likewise kept away from the Plain of Jezreel and the Jordan Valley. By sticking to the central mountain range and the Negev, they could enjoy a region that was suited to pastoral economy but was sparsely populated. They could wander with their herds without encroaching on the rights of others. At the same time, they were generally on the fringes of urban centers where they could obtain supplies, if need be, and also dispose of their own products.

**6. the site of Shechem** Hebrew *mekom Shechem*. This combination of *makom* with the name of a city is unique. It is very likely that the term here has the special meaning of “sacred site,” like the Arabic *maqam*. Sacred sites were always desirable stopping places for travelers and pastoral nomads because of their proximity to springs and wells. Nothing in the narrative suggests that Shechem had any prior sanctity for Abram. Only after receiving a divine revelation does he build an altar there; he does not make use of an existing one.

**the terebinth of Moreh** Hebrew *‘elon moreh*, undoubtedly some mighty tree with sacred associations. Moreh must mean “teacher, oracle giver.” This tree (or a cluster of such trees) was so conspicuous and so famous that it served as a landmark to identify other sites in the area. The phenomenon of a sacred tree, particularly one associated with a sacred site, is well known in a variety of cultures. A distinguished tree, especially one of great antiquity, might be looked upon as the “tree of life” or as being “cosmic,” its stump symbolizing the “navel of the earth” and its top representing heaven. In this sense, it is a bridge between the human and the divine spheres, and it becomes an arena of divine-human encounter, an ideal medium of oracles and revelation. Fertility cults flourished in connection with such trees, and this form of paganism proved attractive to many Israelites. For this reason, the official religion of Israel forbade the planting of trees within the precincts of the altar, as stated in Deuteronomy 16:21.

It is to be noted that Shechem seems to have been particularly rich in traditions about trees of special significance. Jacob hid idolatrous appurtenances “under the terebinth (*‘elah*) that was near Shechem” (Gen. 35:4); Joshua “took a great stone and set it up at the foot of the oak (*‘allah*) in the sacred precinct of the Lord” in Shechem (Josh. 24:26); Abimelech was proclaimed king of that city “at the terebinth (*‘elon*) of the pillar” (Judg. 9:6); and there was also “the terebinth of the soothsayers” in the vicinity (Judg. 9:37). All these may refer to one and the same tree, although it is not certain that *‘elon* is identical with the other similarly named trees (cf. Hos. 4:12)—the *‘elah*, which is the *Pistacia terebinthus* and the *‘allon*, which is the quercus. These latter two are used generically, whereas *‘elon* always appears in a specific usage in combination with another term.

**The Canaanites were then in the land** “Canaanite” here, as often, is used generically for all the pre-Israelite inhabitants. God promised the land to Abram (v. 7), even though it was then occupied by others.

The participle “then” has long vexed commentators because of the implication that at the time of the Narrator the Canaanites no longer existed, a situation that did not become a reality until long after Joshua’s conquest. Rashi takes the phrase to mean that the Canaanites were then in the process of conquering the land from its earlier inhabitants, but this is not historically feasible. Ibn Ezra cryptically remarks: “Possibly the Canaanite was at that time taking the land from others, but if this not be the case, then I have a secret explanation, and the man of discretion will keep silent” (*yesh li sod ve-ha-maskil yiddom*). The supercommentary on this passage by Joseph b. Eliezer Bonfils (*Tsafenat Pa’neah*, second half of the 14th century C.E.) explains Ibn Ezra’s comment as follows: “Moses could not possibly have employed the word ‘then’ (*‘az*), for reason demands that the word would have been written at a time when the Canaanite was no longer in the land, and we know that the Canaanite departed only after the death of Moses when Joshua conquered it. Consequently, it would appear that Moses did not write this word here (*zeh nir’eh shelo’ katav mosheh z’ot ha-millah bekka’n*), but only Joshua or one of the other prophets wrote it....Now since we have to believe in the words of tradition and in the words of prophecy, what difference does it make whether Moses or some other prophet wrote it since the words of all of them are truth and were received by prophecy?” As R. Hezekiah ben Manoah (known as “Chizkuni,” 13th cent. C.E.) noted, the phrase “is written from the perspective of the future” (*‘al shem he-’atid nikhtav*).

**7. The Lord appeared** This is the first theophany, or divine revelation, introduced by Hebrew *va-yera’*, as distinct from divine speech to an individual introduced by *va-yo’mer* (cf. v. 1). This term, which is characteristic of the Genesis patriarchal narratives, is used three times with Abraham (also 17:1; 18:1), twice with Isaac (26:2, 24), and once with Jacob (55:9). The stem *r’-h*, “to see,” belongs to the formal vocabulary of prophecy. An early name for a prophet in Israel was *ro’eh*, “seer” (1 Sam. 9:9), and in the Nifal form the verb is a technical term for divine self-disclosure. It is quite clear, however, that such a usage need not imply any visual accompaniment to the oral communication. Thus, the experience of the boy Samuel in the temple at Shiloh is purely auditory (1 Sam. 3:11–14), yet it is described as a vision (Heb. *mar’eh*, 1 Sam. 3:15). Likewise, the superscriptions to several prophetic books employ the synonymous verb *chazah*, “to see, behold,” although what follows is speech alone (cf. Isa. 1:2; Amos 1:1f; Mic. 1:1f).

**I will assign this land...** This refers back to verse 1, “the land that I will show you.” Its identity is now established. More than this, the original promises of nationhood and blessings are now supplemented by the grant of national territory through which those promises may be consummated. This divine declaration, oft repeated, is one of the seminal texts of the Torah. Henceforth, the history and destiny of the Jewish people are inextricably bound up with the promised land.

**He built an altar there** In gratitude for the promise of land. Among the patriarchs, acts of worship are always individual, never public. The patriarchs do not take part in any existing cult, and they always build new altars or reuse the one they themselves have previously erected. Significantly, we have no record of an act of worship by them outside the boundaries of the Land of Israel, and Abram refrains from putting up an altar inside the land before it has been divinely identified as the land of promise. It is strange that there is no mention made of a sacrifice being offered.

**8. Legal ownership of the land is not the same thing as actual possession.** The nation does not exist, and the patriarchs remain wanderers, ever on the move. Abram journeys on through the central hill country in

a southerly direction. His next station is at a point between Bethel and Ai, about 21 miles (33.7 km.) south of Shechem.

**Ai** Hebrew *ha-'ai*. The definite article shows that the place derives its name from a common noun meaning "the ruin." The site is generally identified with a conspicuous mound known as et-Tell, about 1 mile (1.6 km.) southeast of Bethel. Excavations have shown that it had been a flourishing town in the Early Bronze Age during the third millennium B.C.E. The place figures prominently in the conquests of Joshua (Josh. 7:2–8:28), who is said to have "burned down Ai, and turned it into a mound of ruins for all time" (8:28).

**he built there an altar...invoked the Lord by name** Scripture offers no explanation for the attraction of the particular spot or for the reason for building the altar, but it is important enough for Abram to return there on his way back from Egypt (Gen. 13:2–4). Bethel is identified with modern Beitin, which lies about 10.5 miles (17 km.) north of Jerusalem at the junction of the north-south highway with an east-west road. It was the site of an important Canaanite sanctuary to the god El, head of the pantheon, but, as in the case of Shechem, Abram ignores the prior pagan sanctity of the place and builds an altar to his own God Adonai, thus endowing the site with a new religious history.

**9. toward the Negeb** That is, to southern and southeastern Judah around Beer-sheba, below the central hill country and the Shephelah. The name derives from a root meaning "dry, parched," indicative of the precarious rainfall in the area and the arid terrain. By now, Abram has covered the entire length of the country from north to south.

## **ABRAM IN EGYPT (vv. 10–21)**

No sooner does Abram receive the divine blessings than the contrasting reality of the present asserts itself. The promises of nationhood and territory seem to be in danger of miscarrying. Famine drives him from the land, and physical peril threatens him and his wife. But God's purposes cannot be frustrated by human powers. The hand of Providence is ever ready to deliver those whom He has chosen. The theme of peril and reaffirmation of promises is a recurring one throughout the Book of Genesis.

**10. There was a famine in the land** Although famine might sometimes result from plagues of insects, as indicated in Deuteronomy 28:38 and Joel 1-2, or from enemy action, as described in 2 Kings 6:25 and 25:3, its primary cause in Canaan would have been prolonged failure of the seasonal rains. The effects of famine there would have been aggravated by the normal inability to produce surpluses and the lack of long-term storage facilities, as well as by the unequal distribution of existing stocks both for social reasons and because of limited means of transportation in a country of such varied topography. Egypt, on the other hand, relied for its rich fertility on the more dependable and predictable rise of the Nile.

In reality, true famine due to natural causes, as distinct from the threat of famine, is not so common in the Bible. The fact, therefore, that each of the patriarchs experiences famine in the land (26:1, 42:1, 43:1) has special significance. In the Book of Genesis, the promised land is not "flowing with milk and honey," and the divine promises are not intended to bring quiet and repose to their recipients. The realities of nature and of the human landscape are harsh. Living in the land is difficult, sometimes precarious. All this continually impinged upon the religious consciousness of Israel. It generated a heightened sense of dependence on God's protection and a more intense awareness of His mysterious workings.

**Abram went down** The standard phrase for travel from hilly Canaan to low-lying Egypt, just as one “goes up” in the reverse direction.

**Egypt** The first mention of Egypt as a factor in Israelite history. The narrative prefigures the ambiguity of future relationships—on the one hand as a place of shelter and succor in time of distress, on the other hand as a place of mortal danger. Interestingly, there is no hatred of Egypt in the Bible, despite the slavery and the Exodus. To the contrary, Israel is enjoined: “You shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land” (Deut. 23:8). Notwithstanding repeated prophetic denunciations of Egypt for its duplicity and fickleness in its international relations, Isaiah can envisage a future partnership of Israel and Egypt, and he has God saying: “Blessed be My people Egypt” (Isa. 19:25).

**to sojourn there** An excellent parallel to the present story is provided by a report of an Egyptian frontier official from the age of Ramses II. Sent to his superior, the “Scribe of the Treasury,” it concerns Edomite shepherds to whom permission was given to cross into Egypt for seasonal pasturing of their flocks in the Delta. It reads: “We have finished letting the Bedouin tribes of Edom pass the fortress...to keep them alive and to keep their cattle alive” (ANET, p. 259). The Hebrew stem *gw-r*, “to sojourn,” indicates temporary residence. One of the keywords in Genesis, it appears in one form or another 15 times in relation to the wanderings and status of the patriarchs and their descendants, both in the promised land and in Egypt. Everywhere in the Near East the resident alien (Heb. *ger*) was without legal rights and protection and was wholly dependent upon the good will of the local community. In biblical texts the *ger* is usually classified along with the deprived and underprivileged of society, such as the orphan and the widow, whom it is forbidden to oppress and to whose needs one must be particularly sensitive.

**for the famine was severe** Only *force majeure* would have led Abram to leave the land.

## THE KIDNAPPING OF SARAI (vv. 11–20)

As Abram approaches the Egyptian border, he fears that Sarai’s great beauty might tempt some malevolent person to murder him and take her. In order to save his life, he asks his wife to pass herself off as his sister. Sure enough, his fears prove to be well founded. Sarai is spotted by Pharaoh’s officials, who carry her off to the royal palace. Only divine intervention protects her honor, and she returns to her husband unviolated.

The text repeats this incident twice more: in 20:1-18 in relation to Abimelech king of Gerar and in 26:1, 6-11 in connection with Isaac and Rebekah at the same place and with a king of the same name. Modern critical scholarship assumes that the triplet resulted from varying treatments of a single original incident by different sources. It should be noted, however, that the biblical Narrator makes clear that Abram anticipated danger of the sort described in this chapter as a recurring factor in the course of his wanderings from the day he left Haran: “So when God made me wander from my father’s house, I said to her, ‘Let this be the kindness that you shall do me: whatever place we come to, say there of me: He is my brother’” (Gen. 20:13). According to the literary concepts and the norms of the ancient world, reiteration is a desirable and characteristic feature of the epic tradition. To the biblical Narrator, repetition of the experience serves to emphasize and reinforce his didactic purposes.

There can be no doubt that very ancient traditions lie behind the present narratives. In the first place, no late writer could have invented the idea that Abraham had married his half sister (Gen. 20:12). Such a note could not have originated as a late apologetic in mitigation of Abraham’s



misrepresentation about his relationship to Sarai. To assume otherwise is to believe that, in the consciousness of the biblical Narrator, incest was less offensive than a lie told in self-defense! Another point is that both Canaanite and Greek epics provide parallels to the motif of the abduction of the hero's beautiful wife. From Ugarit comes the story of King Keret who lost his lovely spouse Hurrai (or Hurriya), through whom he was supposed to be destined to carry on his line, and had to mount a military campaign to recover her. From the Greek sphere, there is of course the legend of Helen of Troy, who was twice kidnapped, once in her youth by Theseus and again after she married Menelaus. Her abduction to Troy by Paris was the cause of the Trojan War. It is reasonable to assume that similar sagas circulated about the patriarchs of Israel. These were collected and incorporated into the patriarchal narratives, but with an entirely different perspective and for purposes totally at variance with their Canaanite-Greek analogues.

As to the purposes that motivated the biblical Narrator, it may be presumed that the uncommon beauty of the progenitrix of the people of Israel was a matter of national pride, as were also the comings and goings of the patriarchs at the courts of kings. Another factor may have been the sensuality and immorality of the pagan nations. Finally, and of major concern, is the emphasis on God's direct, protective intervention—just at the moment when all human resources have failed and it appears that the divine promises are to be aborted. The matriarch is recovered by the action of God, not as a result of warfare waged by the outraged husband.

**11. a beautiful woman** Sarai is 65 at the time, ten years younger than her husband. Her surpassing beauty is a theme that fascinated Jews of antiquity and has received attention in many sources.

**12. and let you live** Though in shame and dishonor.

**13. Please say** This is not an order but a respectful plea.

**you are my sister** The biblical heroes are not portrayed as demigods or perfect human beings. They are mortals of flesh and blood, subject to the same temptations and possessed of the same frailties as are all other human beings. Abram, the man of implicit faith in God's word, is fearful of the evil of which people are capable. In order to save his own life, he appears to place his wife's honor in jeopardy through misrepresentation of their relationship. Sarai's collusion may be looked upon as an act of self-sacrifice on behalf of her husband—but how is Abram's conduct to be judged? Ramban comments as follows: "Know that our father Abraham inadvertently committed a great sin by placing his virtuous wife in a compromising situation because of his fear of being killed. He should have trusted in God to save him, his wife and all he had, for God has the power to help and to save...."

As opposed to this critical view, there is the analysis of Radak that Abram is confronted with a moral dilemma, forced to make a choice between two evils. If he discloses the truth he will be killed, and his wife, beautiful and unprotected in an alien society of low morality, will assuredly be condemned to a life of shame and abuse. If, however, he resorts to subterfuge, she may be violated by some Egyptian, but at least husband and wife would both survive. It would have been improper, then, to have relied on a miracle as an excuse for inaction.

Whatever may be the shortcomings of Radak's interpretation, the moral problem that faced the patriarch was very real. His decision involved a conflict between human life and human dignity within a hierarchy of values. The condescending view of some modern commentators that it is unfair to judge Abram's behavior by the (supposedly) superior moral standards of today is based on a confusion of chivalry with morality.

**sister** In using this term, Abram actually resorts to equivocation rather than to outright falsehood because in Hebrew parlance “sister” is ambiguous. Apart from its primary denotation of sibling—which, in fact, Sarai was to him (Gen. 20:12)—it is also an expression of love. In Egyptian, too, “sister” was used of both sweetheart and wife. But there may well be much more to it than this. In the ancient Near East, there was a well-known sociolegal institution of “fratriarchy” that existed over a long period of time. Where there is no father, the brother assumes legal guardianship of his sister, particularly with respect to obligations and responsibilities in arranging marriage on her behalf. Therefore, whoever wished to take Sarai to wife would have to negotiate with her “brother.” In this way, Abram could gain time to plan escape. Of course, this went awry when the Egyptian turned out to be Pharaoh himself.

**go well with me...remain alive** An example of hendiadys, for the two clauses express a single thought, not two separate ideas. This is proven by the contextually unambiguous parallel in Jeremiah 38:20: “that it may go well with you and your life be spared.”

**14. the Egyptians saw...** Clearly, Sarai did not generally veil her face (see Comments to 24:65 and 38:14f).

**15.** This incident is illuminated by the Egyptian “Tale of Two Brothers,” in which Bata’s beautiful second wife miraculously comes to the attention of Pharaoh, who has her hunted down and brought to his palace. There he makes love to her, even though he knows she is married.

**Pharaoh** The first biblical appearance of this title. His name is not given, nor is that of any other pharaoh, in Genesis or Exodus. The omissions complicate the problem of fixing the chronology of the patriarchal period. The title itself derives from the Egyptian *per-o*, “the great house,” already a designation of the royal palace as early as ca. 2500 B.C.E. In New Kingdom times (from the 16th century B.C.E. on), it came to be used, by metonymy, for the king, in the same way as “The White House” can designate the American president or “The Crown,” the British monarch.

**16. it went well with Abram** A *double entendre*. The phrase cannot be separated from its use in verse 13, while it derives its definition from the following clause. Abram was not killed; in fact, he acquired much wealth, the source of which is not explained. Perhaps Abram was compensated by Pharaoh for the indignity and breach of etiquette on the part of his courtiers in resorting to force rather than negotiation, as custom demanded (cf. 20:14,16). Mention of Abram’s wealth and possessions also provides the background for the next incident in his life.

**sheep** Hebrew *tso’n* includes goats. The two species usually were herded together.

**oxen** Hebrew *bakar* is a generic term for domesticated bovines, and it usually appears as a collective.

**asses** Hebrew *chamor* is the domesticated descendant of the *Equus asinus*. Here it indicates only the male variety. The ass played a vital role in the Israelite economy as a riding and draft animal, and it was also used for agriculture (cf. Deut. 22:10). Its importance may be gauged from the fact that it is the only unclean animal whose firstling requires redemption.

**she-asses, and camels** The riding animals are placed last. The separation of female from male asses reflects the experience of ass-herders. The male has a very powerful sex drive that asserts itself when he scents the presence of a female of the species, even from afar. He then becomes almost uncontrollable. For this reason, the female affords superior convenience and greater ease of handling as a riding animal. Possession of many she-asses was a sign of much wealth, as may be seen, for example, in Job 1:3 and 42:12.

**camels** The presence of the camel in this and other lists raises a complex problem. The camel appears elsewhere in the patriarchal narratives, but it is not the regular mode of transportation. Its use seems to be restricted to women. Abraham sets out for Mount Moriah on an ass; Simeon and Levi find asses, but not camels, among the loot of Shechem; Joseph's brothers mount asses to go down to Egypt to buy food; Joseph does not send camels to transport his father from Canaan, and there is no reference to camels among the animals sold to Joseph by the hard-pressed Egyptians in return for food. The camel does not figure in Egyptian texts and art until the Persian period. It is conspicuously absent from the published Mari texts from Mesopotamia, which are replete with information about pastoral nomadic groups and their way of life. Thousands of commercial and administrative texts from the Old Babylonian Period (ca. 1950–1530 B.C.E.) maintain complete silence on the existence of this animal. All available evidence points to the conclusion that the effective domestication of the camel as a widely used beast of burden did not take place before the 12th century B.C.E., which is a long time after the patriarchal period.

It cannot be denied, however, that mention of the camel in the Abrahamic and Jacob narrative cycles is integral to the stories, at least in chapters 24 and 31, and cannot be the work of a late glossator. On the other hand, to regard these narratives as anachronistically late productions from a time when the camel was already widely known is to leave unexplained why that beast, which figures so infrequently in biblical historiography, should have been put into the patriarchal stories, while the horse, which figures far more frequently, is totally absent.

A solution to the problem may perhaps be sought along other lines. Certain bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian lexical texts from Mesopotamia equate a domesticated animal called "a donkey-of-the-sea-land" with a dromedary, thus proving a knowledge of the latter in southern Mesopotamia in Old Babylonian times (ca. 2000–1700 B.C.E.). Moreover, the scribes knew to differentiate between the dromedary and the Bactrian camel, and a Sumerian text from that period mentions the drinking of camel's milk. The original habitat of the camel seems to have been Arabia. It is likely that the domesticated camel at first spread very slowly and long remained a rarity. A wealthy man might acquire a few as a prestige symbol for ornamental rather than utilitarian purposes. This would explain their presence in Abraham's entourage, their nonuse as beasts of burden, and their special mention in situations where wealth and honor need to be displayed, as, for instance, in Genesis 24.

**17. afflicted. . . mighty plagues** Their nature is not explained, but they must have been of the kind that would somehow suggest a connection with Pharaoh's passion for Sarai, as Ramban suggests. Temporary sexual impotence induced by some severe inflammation or acute infection of the genital area suggests itself (cf. Gen. 20:17f). Incidentally, there seems to be a word play behind the Hebrew expression, for the stem *n-g-'* can mean "to afflict, plague," as well as "to come into physical contact with, to harass sexually" (cf. Gen. 20:6; 26:11; Prov. 6:29; Ruth 2:9).

**18–19.** His suspicions aroused by the affliction, Pharaoh must have interrogated Sarai, who admitted to her true status. In his scolding of Abram there is a tone of righteous indignation that arouses the sympathy of the reader. Abram does not justify his conduct. His silence may have been dictated by embarrassment; yet it is also possible that the king's reputation was such as to allow for misgivings that his display of moral rectitude was more the product of his current torments than of deep-rooted conviction.

**20.** The text is vague, perhaps deliberately so, as to whether Pharaoh provided guards to accompany the patriarchal clan across the border for its protection and as a sign of honor, as Ibn Ezra suggests, or in order to enforce its expulsion from his territory, as Saadiah maintains.