

Genesis, Chapter 12, Essays

Abraham—Journey of faith

Tad Szulc

Imagine a world saturated with ignorance and hatred, a lonely, brutish place without any hope of redemption. Now, picture a man—Abram, the Bible calls him—who hears a command from God: Leave behind the life you know and I will one day bless the entire world through you. How this will happen, and why, is a mystery to this man, but he sets out. In time, God gives him a new name: Abraham. In time, he will become the patriarch of three monotheistic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. And history will be forever transformed by his story.

Was there ever, thousands of years ago, a personage named Abraham whom more than three billion people—more than half of humanity—venerate as the father, patriarch and spiritual ancestor of their faiths? Two billion of them are Christians, 1.2 billion are Muslims, and close to 15 million are Jews. And had Abraham verily spoken with God and celebrated with him covenants that became the foundations of these religions?

The outlines of Abraham's life appear first and most fully in Genesis, the first book of the holy scriptures of Judaism and the Christian Bible's Old Testament. Abraham also makes frequent appearances in other Jewish and Christian writings, including the Talmud and the New Testament, and he is mentioned time and again in the Koran, the holy book of Islam.

Christianity accepted Abraham as its patriarch almost at its own birth. Paul the Apostle wrote in the New Testament's *Epistle to the Romans* of "that faith of our father Abraham." And in the *Magnificat* in Luke, the Virgin Mary says "the Lord helped his servant Israel in remembrance of mercy; as he spake to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever." The Prophet Muhammad, who taught the principles of Islam in the seventh century, similarly honored Abraham, whom the Koran recognizes as one of Islam's prophets: "We believe in God, and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Isma'il, Isaac, Jacob." The Koran elevates Abraham's story to religious practice. Muslims are commanded to prefer the religion of Abraham the Hanif (monotheist), and the Koran says God took Abraham as Khalil, His "friend."

Yet when I asked scholars the question, "Was there ever a man called Abraham?" as often as not they were respectful (we can't disprove it), but convinced of the futility of trying to find a flesh-and-blood individual. "Abraham is beyond recovery," said Israel Finkelstein, a biblical archaeologist at Tel Aviv University. Without any proof of the patriarch's existence, the search for a historical Abraham is even more difficult than the search for a historical Jesus.

The important thing, we are told, is to assess the meaning and legacy of the ideas Abraham came to embody. He is most famously thought of as the founder of monotheism, although Genesis never credits him with this. The stories do, however, describe his hospitality and peace-ableness and, most important, his faith and obedience to God.

Whatever scholars may say about the history of Abraham, Genesis provides an irresistible narrative. So I set out during the year 2000, following him through Genesis, keeping other scriptural writings and modern scholarship within reach. As Genesis tells it, Abraham was born in Ur of the Chaldees, journeyed to Haran, thence to Canaan and west to Egypt. He returned to Canaan, to

Hebron, where he died and was buried in a cave next to his wife Sarah.

When might these wanderings have taken place? Islamic scholarship does not delve into Abraham's origins, and in the other two religions there is no firm consensus. Working with the lineages recorded in the Bible, some scholars place Abraham around 2100 B.C.E. A number of historians who have married biblical history with archaeology converge on the period from 2000 to 1500 B.C.E.; others argue that the most you can say is that an Abraham figure could have preceded the Israelite monarchy, which began about 1000 B.C.E.

For all his mystery, Abraham remains intensely alive today. In fact, we may even be witnessing a renaissance of his memory. Pope John Paul II—Abraham's ardent champion—earnestly hoped to make a pilgrimage early in the millennial year in honor of the patriarch, because Jews, Christians and Muslims all regard themselves as Abraham's spiritual offspring. In 1994, the pope told me that going to Ur was his dream. "No visit to the lands of the Bible is possible without a start in Ur, where it all began," he said. But at the last moment, in late 1999, Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi dictator, canceled the invitation.

The pontiff announced that instead he would hold in the Vatican "a spiritual commemoration of some of the key events of Abraham's experience" On February 23, 2000, Rome witnessed a huge Vatican auditorium being turned over to Abraham. When the pope lit branches on an altar recalling the site of Abraham's impending sacrifice of his son, smoke and incense filled the auditorium. For a moment 6,000 of us relived the story.

Why is Abraham so vividly alive today? Faith—Judaic, Christian and Islamic—and his majestic yet elusive presence provide one answer. But the most eloquent explanation I've heard originated with Rabbi Menahem Froman, who lives near Hebron. He said, "For me Abraham is philosophy, Abraham is culture. Abraham may or may not be historical. Abraham is a message of loving-kindness. Abraham is an idea. Abraham is everything. I don't need flesh and blood."

"GO FORTH....AND YOU SHALL BE A BLESSING."

And Terah took Abram his son and Lot son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law and he set out with them Ur of the Chaldees toward the land of Canaan. (Genesis 11:31)

My pursuit of Abraham began with a 500-mile taxi ride from Amman, the capital of Jordan, to Baghdad, in Iraq. This was followed by a 200-mile dash southeast through a wasteland of sand and scrub grass. Crossing the Euphrates River, I passed through a half-dozen military checkpoints, arriving at last in Ur, widely believed to be Abraham's birthplace. My first impression was one of utter disappointment: Ur was dusty and forlorn, with no discernible pulse. The only visual point of reference was the pyramid-like brick tower, or ziggurat, built in tribute to Sin, the moon god, around 2100 B.C.E.

A sharp east wind arose as Dheif Mushin guided me around the site of the ancient city, which covered about 120 acres. Founded sometime in the fifth millennium B.C.E., Ur was unearthed during the 1920s and '30s by an expedition under the British archaeologist Leonard Woolley. Along with the ziggurat, the team found royal tombs and the remains of houses on city streets, which Woolley gave such incongruous names as Church Lane and Paternoster Row. The tombs held scores of stunning objects in gold, silver, and precious stones, confirming that Ur was at the heart of a rich and powerful civilization.

"This is the house," declared Mushin, a slim, blue-eyed man of 41. We had come to the corner of

Church Lane and Broad Street and were staring into a shallow pit near the remains of the palace of Ur's glorious third dynasty, which lasted from 2100 to 2000 B.C.E. In the pit were a square stone floor and partly restored walls—the ruins of one of the largest houses Woolley excavated in Ur—dating from between 2000 and 1595 B.C.E. Woolley made much of his “discovery” of Abraham's birthplace, for which he was knighted. Although the possibility that Abraham had actually lived in this house was remote, I couldn't help but be excited by the thought.

“You must imagine Ur as it was,” Piotr Michalowski, an authority on ancient Mesopotamia at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, told me before I left for Iraq. “In the third millennium, Ur was the metropolis of Mesopotamia—a port on the Euphrates very close to the Persian Gulf.” The river brought rich alluvium down to Ur, creating a flood-plain that gave generous sustenance to a population of perhaps 12,000 at the city's peak around 2100 B.C.E. Since then, said Michalowski, the coastline retreated a hundred miles, leaving Ur behind—to the sands.

We owe our knowledge of the region to the Mesopotamians, who invented cuneiform writing around 3200 B.C.E. They produced hundreds of thousands of clay tablets and cylinders chronicling life; Ur alone has yielded thousands of texts just from the third dynasty.

“We have many archives from about the 19th century B.C.E. dealing with seagoing enterprises,” said Michalowski, who is editor of the *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*. “I see a thriving urban center, with bustling, narrow streets full of shops, where craftsmen were making everything from leather goods to precious ornaments. Ur was a major commercial center—one might think of Venice in later days.”

Traffic in river vessels and cattle carts and donkey caravans linked Ur and Mesopotamia with present-day Iran, Turkey and Afghanistan, as well as with Syria, Israel and Egypt. Date palms grew in the countryside, and irrigation canals from the Euphrates and the Tigris, which then flowed closer to the city, made farming possible: barley, lentils, onions, garlic. Sheep and goats supplied ghee and wool.

It was beguiling to think of an Abraham growing up in Ur—I imagine a thin teenager of middle height, dressed in comfortable leather and wool, going to school, playing with his brothers, Nahor and Haran, and their friends. “Only a very small proportion of the population could read and write,” said Michalowski. “If Abraham was literate, that would mean he had taken schooling at the house of a priest or bureaucrat who would have taught him a broad range of skills. He would have studied languages, arithmetic, and accounting, but above all else he would have been immersed in Sumerian literature. This would be the intellectual milieu he grew up in.”

I see Abraham developing into a tough, compact young man with evident leadership skills. He may have worshiped Sin, the god of the moon and Ur's chief deity. “Mesopotamians worshiped a pantheon of deities, including major ones like Sin,” said Michalowski, “but each person also had an additional, personal god.” I wondered if, somehow, Abraham's reflections on the moon god had led him to the idea that the world is governed by one God.

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In my quest for Abraham, divine inspiration would have helped. It was frustrating to find myself continuously suspended between different sets of legends—like virtual realities—with no facts to direct my investigation.

For the scriptural recorders, the concept of time was so elastic that Abraham's family history strains credulity. In Genesis the entire story of Abraham's lineage is told in breathless, compressed

language, starting with Noah and the flood, then proceeding with Noah's son Shem and Shem's brothers and their progeny. If this genealogy is taken literally, it would have covered centuries—ten generations from Noah to Abraham.

Given the vacuum of evidence, it is understandable that historians and archaeologists are locked in debate about the patriarch's existence and time of birth. Abraham Malamat, a spry septuagenarian who is emeritus professor of Jewish history at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, believes Abraham may have lived sometime between 2000 and 1800 B.C.E. "The Bible and the entire body of ancient Israelite history make this the most plausible time frame for Abraham," Malamat told me one snowy evening in his Jerusalem apartment. "We are possibly the closest people on the subject. A historian is closer than an archaeologist."

Israel Finkelstein, who is chairman of the archaeology department at Tel Aviv University, argues that written documents are not the only source for reconstructing history. "In the past 20 years, archaeology has become the main tool for studying the earliest phases of ancient Israel. Archaeology is sometimes the only tool." There is no archaeological evidence, Finkelstein says, that camels—which are often described in Genesis as beasts of burden—were widely used for carrying goods until after 1000 B.C.E. He sees this as but one clue that the way of life reflected in the stories about Abraham is that of a much later time than the period of 2100 B.C.E., which some scholars arrived at by studying lineages in the Bible. "Whether there was a historical Abraham or not, I cannot say. But much of the reality behind Abraham in Genesis should probably be dated to the seventh century B.C.E."¹

Ur is another case in point. The writers of Genesis refer to it as Ur of the Chaldees, but scholars agree that the scriptures are confusing, because the Chaldees did not appear in Mesopotamia until early in the first millennium B.C.E. Finkelstein suggests this is further confirmation that the Genesis stories emerged at that time, as the people of Judah sought to build a national identity in a hostile world.²

I asked Abraham Malamat about these confusions. "There are anachronisms like the camels—you might have a few anachronisms—but this doesn't destroy the overall picture." Rather, he says, these inconsistencies should be seen as later additions by biblical writers and therefore as hardly relevant for dating purposes.

Amid all the uncertainties, one thing seemed clear as I climbed the famous ziggurat in Ur with Dheif Mushin: To the ancients, the three-tiered tower must have been a mighty symbol of the solidity of traditional beliefs. The great monument brought me closer to understanding the magnitude of Abraham's break from those beliefs. We can never know, but perhaps his early experiences in Ur prepared him for the spark of inspiration that carried him—and humanity—on a great journey.

¹ Much too much has been made of the "non-existent camel," to my mind. Camels in Genesis are rare, not pre-eminent, and they did exist. See Sarna on the subject on Page 19 of the commentary section.

² This is a point Sarna made in a commentary to Chapter 11. He concluded with this (for whatever it is worth): "Some scholars have noted that the text may refer to one of the sites named Ur in Upper Mesopotamia. These were possibly founded by citizens of the famous city in the south and named after it. An Upper Mesopotamian Ur would have been much closer to Haran, which is central to the patriarchal narratives."

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In ancient Mesopotamia as in the Middle East today, armed conflict was frequent. Cuneiform texts record an attack by Elamite armies from present-day Iran around 2000 B.C.E., and a disruption of this kind may have contributed to Abraham's leaving Ur. Whatever the reason, Genesis tells us that he left toward the land of Canaan with Terah, Sarah and his nephew, Lot, and they came to Haran and settled there.

"Settling and starting off again, waging war and making peace, fighting battles and concluding treaties"—this was to be the basic rhythm of Abraham's life, writes Karl-Josef Kuschel, a theology professor at Germany's University of Tübingen. The 600-mile journey from Ur must have taken the family and their caravan of donkeys several months as they progressed northward up the Euphrates Valley to Haran. The city lay on the banks of the Balikh River at the crossroads of important trade routes in the Fertile Crescent. Like Ur, it was a major center of worship of the moon god, Sin.

In Haran, Abraham would have found himself in the midst of a clamorous community of Amorites, Hurrians, and other ethnic groups. Haran today is a dusty Turkish village of around 500 people living in beehive-shaped clay houses, joined by arches to increase the shade and air circulation. Numerous archaeological excavations show that builders in ancient times also sought, by using thick walls and wide-open yards, to moderate the effects of temperatures that can exceed 120 [degrees] F.

With Aydin Kudu, a young guide from Istanbul, I visited the remains of a house on a small hill in the center of Haran, where, according to local legend, Abraham lived. Judging from its configuration, this spacious construction had belonged to a large and prosperous family. Sitting on a low wall, Aydin and I speculated that Abraham's family must have been quite affluent during the years they lived in Haran. After Terah, his father, died, Abraham, as paterfamilias, would have supervised the family's flocks, traded wool for wheat with farmers, and recruited local people for his growing clan. Seeing the multitude of sheep around Haran, it struck me that the scene today was probably not very different from that in Abraham's time.³

Later, I tried to extract at least one new Abrahamic legend out of Suleyman Sancar, a village elder. Sancar, a dignified 63-year-old Muslim with an impressive white beard, had invited me to his house for ceremonial tea and pita bread with a few friends. But all I got was the suggestion that a king of the region early in the second millennium B.C.E. was Abraham's uncle. Such stories exist to please visitors, small groups of whom—mainly Christians—come by bus every week to search for Abraham's heritage.

If archaeology denies us any direct evidence of Abraham, Terah's name appears tantalizingly in cuneiform tablets. Omer Faruk Harman of Marmara University in Istanbul cautions that "Terah" almost certainly is not a personal name. It is probably a clan name or the name of a town in extreme northern Syria or, more likely, southeastern Turkey, not far from Haran. Still, Abraham was a son of Terah, which may establish the connection between Abraham and Haran.

While in Haran I made a side trip to a place that claims its own intimate connection with the patriarch. Sanhurfa (known as Urfa until World War I) is a pleasant, relaxed city of nearly half a

³ We are reading this for the description of the world in which Abraham lived and about the journeys he undertook. Unfortunately, as wonderful a reporter as he was, Szulc clearly did not get many of his facts straight about Abraham's life, such as that he left his father in Haran and moved to Canaan and was not around when his father died.

million an hour's drive away. Some scholars believe that because Sanhurfa is so much closer to Haran than Ur, it is the more logical candidate for Abraham's birthplace. Either way, paternity of Abraham is a boon to tourism, and the city has instituted annual Abraham festivals that swell city coffers.

Not surprisingly, Sanhurfa is rife with legends about Abraham. One says he was born in a cave at the foot of a rock outcrop in the southern part of the city. According to this tale Abraham aged a month on the first day after his birth and turned 12 on his first birthday. His faith in a single God led him to smash figures of deities and idols. Furious, King Nimrod ordered Abraham burned, but a huge pool of water materialized, dousing the fire, and flaming logs turned into fierce fish that saved Abraham.⁴ A few steps from the cave two large pools—Halil ur Rahman and Aynzeliha—symbolize the miracle. They are stocked with a plethora of fat carp that are believed to be sacred: He who eats Abraham's carp will be struck blind.

Many of Sanhurfa's pilgrims come from Iran, and buses arrive a few times a week with Muslim worshipers, chiefly women, their heads covered with scarves. Worshipers enter the cave through a small mosque with a minaret, spend a few minutes inside praying, then leave. Some pray outside at the low stone wall around the mosque, bowing over it or prostrating themselves on the ground. The afternoon of my visit, a lone elderly woman in a black head scarf was praying at the wall as lightning flashed overhead.

Wherever Abraham was born—Sanhurfa or Ur or somewhere else—it was in Haran, Genesis says, that he received the words that established his obedient relationship with God. Once again, he would have to leave his home. And the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your land and your birthplace and your father's house to the land I will show you. And I will make you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing."

As Robert Alter of the University of California, Berkeley, writes, "Abram, a mere figure in a notation of genealogy and migration...becomes an individual character...when he is here addressed by God."

The only time I came close to glimpsing the patriarch as an individual was in Jerusalem, when Abraham Malamat showed me a book containing reproductions of a fresco painted in an ancient palace in Mari, Syria, about 200 miles southeast of Haran. Dating from the early second millennium B.C.E., which Malamat believes is the right period for Abraham, the palace—along with tens of thousands of cuneiform tablets—was excavated by a French expedition starting in 1933.

What I saw was a rather unheroic-looking man with brownish skin and a small black beard. He is wearing a black cap with a white headband, and the two-horned head of a sacrificial bull reposes by his lap. "His face is characteristic of the western Semitic type" Malamat said. "So are the cap and the bull. I think it most likely that Abraham descended from western Semitic nomadic tribes, probably from Syria or southern Mesopotamia.

"This picture in my opinion comes close to Abraham," Malamat continued. "Maybe he's a concept, but his figure makes sense. There are pictures on the Mari walls, figures that may be close to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." It was the old conundrum: Without clear proof, the only thing you can ever say about Abraham is: "In my opinion."

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⁴ Interesting twists on rabbinic legends.

And Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew and all the goods they had gotten ... and they set out on the way to the land of Canaan, and they came to the land of Canaan.

As best as can be reconstructed from imprecise maps of the ancient Fertile Crescent, Abraham traveled southwest from Haran across Syria, past Damascus. A large body of retainers would have accompanied him. Abraham's crossing into Canaan gave me the sensation that I was emerging from a fog and beginning to see the historical landscape. Not only is Genesis a more detailed road map from this point on—it names Canaan and specific locations there—but history itself is reasonably explicit about the region and the people Abraham would have encountered in the Promised Land.

Flowing with milk and honey, as the Bible describes it, Canaan stretched roughly from Syria in the north to Egypt in the south. Canaanites produced an unusual purple dye made from shellfish, so much so that the region came to be called "the land of purple." They were active traders—one meaning of "Canaanite" was "merchant"—and as such were subject to the influences of their flanking civilizations, Egypt and Mesopotamia. Around the time Abraham may have arrived, Mesopotamia was an especially important source of goods, people, and ideas.

"And Abram crossed through the land to the site of Shechem, to the Terebinth of the Oracle," proclaims Genesis. Shechem is one of the oldest cities in the Middle East, dating from the beginning of the second millennium B.C.E. Situated west of the Jordan River, it is today's Nablus, a bustling city of 130,000 under the control of the Palestinian Authority. In Shechem, God appeared to Abraham, saying, "To your seed I will give this land." Genesis gives no response from Abraham but notes that he built an altar to the Lord.

As to Canaanite religion, Abraham would have encountered a fertility-centered religion with seasonal festivals and animal sacrifices. In Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the Bible portrays the Canaanites as idol worshipers who held human sacrifices and engaged in deviant sex, practices seen as a threat to an emerging monotheism, but neither archaeology nor Canaanite texts support this description of the Canaanites.

In Nablus, I met up with Avner Goren, an archaeologist with an encyclopaedic knowledge of biblical history. We went looking for evidence of Abraham's Shechem, but found nothing that could be tied to the patriarch. Everything seemed harmonious while we were there, but before long lethal battles would erupt between Palestinians and Israelis. Automatic arms' fire would fill the air around the tomb thought to be that of the Prophet Joseph, Abraham's great-grandson. Canaan is still a battlefield, as it has been on and off for thousands of years.

Genesis says nothing about how long Abraham remained in Shechem. All we learn is that from there "he pulled up his stakes...for the high country east of Bethel and pitched his tent with Bethel to the west and Ai to the east, and he built there an altar to the Lord, and he invoked the name of the Lord." Some scholars believe that since Bethel was a Canaanite cultic site, the Bible, by directly connecting Abraham to it, provided a way for the Hebrews to claim it as their own.

From Bethel, the modern Arab town of Baytin, Abraham journeyed south to the Negev desert. It was mainly downhill traveling, over brushland and into the barrens. Irrigation makes the Negev bloom today, but in Abraham's time a dry, rocky expanse filled the landscape between Beersheba and the Gulf of Aqaba. To make matters worse, an especially severe drought struck the Negev soon after his arrival, forcing him to move again. Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was grave in the land. The attraction of Egypt was the Nile and its extravagantly fertile delta.

At this point Abraham must have been questioning God's promises that he would give him a child and a homeland. He was still childless, and after reaching Canaan, he had been uprooted yet again.

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One spring morning I drove from Cairo to Avaris, an archaeological site at Tell el Daba, where Abraham may have established himself. The area produces rice, corn, cotton, and, during the spring months, wheat. I was cordially received by Manfred Bietak, chairman of the Institute of Egyptology at the University of Vienna, who is leading the excavation of the site.

"Absolutely blank" was his immediate reply when I asked what the Egyptian historical sources say about Abraham. "As far as the Egyptians are concerned," he said, "it's as if Abraham never set foot in the delta."

The timing of Abraham's arrival in the delta is as indeterminate as where he settled. Some scholars believe that an Abraham figure could have come to Egypt at the time of the Hyksos (an Egyptian word meaning "foreign rulers") in the first half of the second millennium B.C.E., but most argue he would have been there much earlier.

Whoever the pharaoh was during Abraham's stay in Egypt, he was implicated in Abraham's life in the most intimate way. As Abraham approached the Egyptian border, he said to Sarai his wife, "Look, I know you are a beautiful woman, and so when the Egyptians see you and say, 'She's his wife,' they will kill me while you they will let live. Say, please, that you are my sister, so that it will go well with me on your count and I shall stay alive because of you."

Genesis continues, "and Pharaoh's courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house." That Sarah was no longer a young woman did not seem to have discouraged the pharaoh.

Genesis offers no moral judgments on this peculiar turn of events, nor does it go into any other aspect of Abraham's life when Sarah was presumably in the pharaoh's harem. The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, a compilation of largely Roman Catholic biblical studies, suggests that Abraham's deception calls into question his faith that God would protect him and fulfill the promise that "To your seed I will give this land." The JPS Torah Commentary, a Jewish analysis, makes the point that Abraham would have erred if he had expected God to work a miracle to get him out of this fix. As it turned out, God did intervene. "And the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his household with terrible plagues because of Sarai the wife of Abram."

The lack of detail about Abraham's behavior is a frustrating example of the gaps spawned by the transformation of oral traditions into the written stories of Genesis. If Abraham's deception is open to interpretation, the pharaoh's reaction was abundantly clear.

And Pharaoh summoned Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She's my sister,' so that I took her to me as wife? Now, here is your wife. Take her and get out!"

Abraham was a rich man when he left Egypt—heavily laden with cattle, with silver and gold. By now I see him, consciously or not, beginning to lay the foundation for the establishment of monotheistic religion. To understand Abraham's connection with monotheism, says James Kugel of Harvard University, you have to look beyond Genesis itself, which says nothing directly about it. "Centuries and centuries after Abraham might have lived, there were interpreters who read his story in Genesis. These interpreters lived from around the third century B.C.E. on. When they got to

chapter 12, they said, ‘Oh, why does God start speaking to Abraham and promise him all these wonderful things, like making him a great nation?’ Eventually they went to the Book of Joshua, where it says that Abraham’s family all worshiped other gods.” Kugel says the interpreters concluded that Abraham was the only one who didn’t worship these other gods.

In numerous later works—including the Book of Jubilees (found with the Dead Sea Scrolls), the New Testament, early Christian writings, and the Koran—Abraham is presented as a model of faith and pure monotheism. The idea caught on and became fixed.

After returning to Canaan, Abraham settled a land dispute between his herdsmen and those of his nephew, Lot, who had left Egypt with him. He did this not by fighting but by letting the younger man decide. Lot picked the verdant valley of the Jordan River down to the southernmost shore of the Dead Sea, where the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah stood. Abraham—known ever more as a peacemaker —was content to remain among the mountains and deserts of the Promised Land, making his temporary home under terebinth trees in Mamre.

By now God had appeared to Abraham, reconfirming his gift of the Promised Land. “Raise your eyes and look out from the place where you are to the north and the south and the east and the west, for all the land you see, to you I will give it and to your seed forever....Rise, walk about the land through its length and its breadth, for to you I will give it.”

In the ancient Middle East, walking around a property was a ritual for taking final possession of a piece of land. Genesis makes no mention that Abraham fulfilled God’s order to walk about the land. But the Genesis Apocryphon, an interpretive text found in the 1940s among the Dead Sea Scrolls, fills in this blank, describing at length a journey Abraham made around the Promised Land.

To show his gratitude to God, Abraham built an altar in Hebron, which lies in a hollow in the mountains of Judah some 15 miles southwest of Jerusalem. Although Israel largely withdrew its military forces from the overwhelmingly Arab city in January 1997 as part of the peace process with the Palestinian Authority, the Israeli government kept control of a strip including a small Jewish neighborhood along al Shuhada Street in the center of the old town. Some 450 Jews live on al Shuhada Street (with 210,000 Arabs around them), which was closed to Arab traffic and guarded at either end by Israeli soldiers. I found it eerie driving along the silent, empty street, with the storefronts shuttered.

In Hebron, Abraham suddenly found himself an active military commander. An emissary brought him word that Lot had been captured in Sodom by four war-mongering kings. Genesis, which at times is very precise, recounts that Abraham marshaled 318 of his retainers and struck the enemy at night, chasing them north past Damascus in Syria and freeing Lot.

Returning in triumph, Abraham reached Salem—the town that most likely became Jerusalem, sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. It may have been there that he had a “conversation” with God in which he expressed his doubts about the divine promises. As Robert Alter of UC Berkeley points out, “This first speech to God reveals a hitherto unglimped human dimension of Abram.” God’s promise of a very great reward prompted Abraham to complain about what he thought had been the Lord’s failure to fulfill earlier pledges. He said, “O my Master, Lord, what can You give me when I am going to my end childless...; to me you have given no seed.”

God replied, “Look up to the heavens and count the stars....So shall be your seed.”

On that day, Genesis says, God made a covenant with Abraham: “To your seed I have given this land from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.”

From Salem, Abraham went to Mamre and Hebron, where he now spent most of his time. I visualize him as a grand old man, sitting under a tree, dispensing wisdom, overseeing the family finances, and, of course, talking with God.

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At this point Genesis records an event that would profoundly influence the course of world history. In the ancient Middle East wives who could not bear children encouraged their husbands to procreate with slaves or concubines. Thus Sarah, who was barren, convinced Abraham to have a child with Hagar, an Egyptian slave who had probably stayed with them since the clan's expulsion by the pharaoh.

The birth of Ishmael, Abraham's first son, foreshadowed the emergence in Arabia in the seventh century C.E. of a new religion—Islam—under the guidance of the Prophet Muhammad. The Koran calls Abraham's first son "an apostle (and) a prophet....He was most acceptable in the sight of his Lord." Ishmael's pedigree lent legitimacy to the new faith, but the Koran never mentions Hagar's name.

Abraham first, then Ishmael, are the perfect models of piety for Muslims. Abraham's name appears in 25 of the 114 chapters of the Koran, and to this day Ibrahim and Ismail are common first names among Muslims. "The Koran explains that all true revelations come from God," says John Voll, professor of Islamic history at Georgetown University's Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding. "It is the record of the divine revelation, which is shared by all the scriptures."

There is no doubt that Muhammad and his inner circle of disciples believed in Abraham as the founder of their faith. The Koran orders Muslims to follow the religion of Abraham. "Abraham was not a Jew nor yet a Christian; but he was true in Faith...and he joined not gods with God."

Muhammad was born in Mecca around 570. There he was surrounded by Jewish and Christian communities—although Muslims do not believe that these faiths influenced the revelation of Islam. In 622, Muhammad moved to Medina, where his following quickly grew. He was recognized as the last in a series of prophets, including Adam, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, all of whom appear, redefined, in the Holy Book of Islam.

The Koran reports that Abraham and Isma'il raised the foundations of the House. The "house" is the Kaaba in Mecca, Islam's holiest shrine. One of the four corners of this small rectangular structure is a sacred black stone that is a remnant of the original building. The annual pilgrimage to Mecca, the hajj, when Muslims from all over the world circle the Kaaba, reinforces the central role of Abraham and Ishmael in the Islamic faith.

The Koran does not give particulars about the birth of Ishmael, but Genesis goes into great detail. It reports that after Hagar became pregnant, Sarah resented her. She complained to Abraham that when the Egyptian "saw she had conceived, I became slight in her eyes," and she went on harassing the girl. Abraham replied meekly, "Look, your slavegirl is in your hands. Do to her whatever you think right."

Consequently Hagar fled from Sarah into the desert wilderness. Sarah's motivations are blurred, but what intrigues Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz is that she acted independently of Abraham when circumstances required. As the rabbi put it, Sarah and Abraham were as much partners as a married couple, and "she would allow Hagar to be an instrument of procreation but would not allow her the honor and privilege of being Abraham's beloved wife-companion." By law, Steinsaltz said, "women were quite independent. They had the right to own property, and they had standing. Sarah had a say,

in one way or another.” I asked him if this makes Sarah the first great feminist. “Yes,” the rabbi shot back.

God, for his part, took another view of the situation. An angel intercepted Hagar when, apparently heading home to Egypt, pregnant, she stopped at a spring near Kadesh in the Negev. Hagar told the messenger she was fleeing from Sarah, but the angel ordered her to “return to your mistress and suffer harassment at her hand.” As a consolation the angel said to Hagar, “Look, you have conceived and will bear a son and you will call his name Ishmael for the Lord has heeded your suffering.” Hagar obeyed. Ishmael (whose name in Hebrew means “God has heard”) was born. Abraham was said to be 86 at the time.

Thirteen years after Ishmael’s birth the 99-year-old Abraham was summoned by God, who made explicit his choice of Abraham as the father to a multitude of nations. To symbolize the significance of this new, exalted status, God changed his name from Abram to Abraham. God also changed the name of his wife, Sarai, to Sarah. Then God announced that “I will also give you from her a son,” and upon hearing this, Abraham flung himself on his face and he laughed, saying to himself, “To a hundred-year-old will a child be born, will ninety-year-old Sarah give birth?”

In their next meeting, God appeared to Abraham when he was sitting outside his tent. Looking up, Abraham saw three travelers among the trees. In a customary display of hospitality to strangers, he fetched water to wash their feet and treated the visitors to curds and milk and a calf he had cooked. Waiting on them as they ate (the scene depicted in Rembrandt’s famous etching “Abraham Entertaining the Angels,” owned by the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.), he heard God repeat the promise that Sarah would have a son. Sarah, who had been listening from inside the tent, laughed inwardly, expressing her doubts. “After being shriveled, shall I have pleasure, and my husband is old? ... Shall I really give birth, old as I am?”

After playing host at Mamre, Abraham moved from Hebron back to Beersheba. Within a year his son Isaac (“he who laughs” in Hebrew) was born. Abraham circumcised him on the eighth day, in keeping with God’s order that every male be circumcised.

Genesis then speaks of a second expulsion of Hagar. Sarah demanded this after observing the much older Ishmael playing and laughing with Isaac; she wanted to assure Isaac’s inheritance, even though he was not the firstborn. Now God took Sarah’s side, ordering Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. He told him that “through Isaac shall your seed be acclaimed. But the slavegirl’s son, too, I will make a nation, for he is your seed.”

Hagar and her son were banished to the desert, but they were not alone. God provided for them, giving them a well of water when Hagar had lost all hope. Ishmael, Genesis says, grew up and dwelled in the wilderness, and he became a seasoned bowman. The Bible reveals little else except that his mother procured him an Egyptian wife and he helped bury his father. This is the last mention of Hagar. Muslim tradition holds that mother and son stayed together in Mecca, and they are said to be buried in a common grave—Hijr Ismail—next to the Kaaba.

* * *

Accompanied by Avner Goren, I followed Abraham to Beersheba. When we stopped at one Bedouin settlement, children rushed forward to beg: for water, not money. Abraham, too, needed water, and he dug a well in Beersheba, hoping to live in peace with the local inhabitants. He also planted a tamarisk tree, a symbol of plenty, invoking the name of the Lord, everlasting God. At this stage I envision Abraham as a full-time proselytizer and one-God activist.

The day of our visit to Beersheba was unusually raw; the Negev had just had more than half a foot of snow—one of the heaviest snowfalls in 50 years—and the whitened palm trees looked festive and beautiful. Beersheba was the patriarch's home for a number of years. A well said to be the one dug by Abraham still exists in the center of town, just off busy Hebron Road. (But it no longer provides water.)

Recognizing the city's spiritual importance, in 1979 Anwar Sadat, then president of Egypt, and Menachem Begin, the Israeli prime minister, came to Beersheba to begin peace negotiations between their two nations. But as Goren and I stood in the snow at Abraham's well, three Israeli Air Force F-16 fighter-bombers roared overhead. The message was plain: The Middle East is still far from real peace. Achieving it, repairing Abraham's fractured spiritual legacy, will demand an extreme act of faith from Palestinians and Israelis, whose common heritage is now a matter of scientific proof. A recent study of the DNA of male Jews and Middle Eastern Arabs—among them Syrians, Palestinians, and Lebanese—shows that they share a common set of ancestors.

The ultimate test of Abraham's faith in the only God appears to have arisen in Beersheba, when God ordered Abraham to take Isaac to the land of Moriah and offer him up as a burnt offering on one of the mountains.

When Abraham and Isaac reached their destination—which Jewish and Christian tradition holds to have been the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the site today of the Dome of the Rock shrine—the patriarch erected an altar. He bound Isaac and placed him on a pile of wood on the altar. But when Abraham raised the cleaver to kill his son, God's messenger called out from the heavens, "Do not reach out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him, for now I know that you fear God." A ram, caught by its horns in a nearby thicket, was presented as a burnt offering instead of Isaac.

In the Koran, God similarly tests Abraham's faith by ordering the sacrifice of his son, but the son and the place are not named. In sura, or chapter, 37:102, 112 Abraham said, "O my son! I see in vision that I offer thee in sacrifice." When Abraham shows his willingness to comply with God, he is promised another son, Isaac. "And We gave him the good news of Isaac—a prophet—one of the Righteous." Most Muslims therefore believe that Ishmael was the one to be sacrificed and that this test occurred in or near Mecca.

In Genesis, Abraham returned to Beersheba. Sarah died in Qiryat Arba, near Hebron, at the age of 127. Abraham buried her in the Cave of Machpelah, in a tomb he bought for 400 silver shekels. He then dispatched a servant to the city of Nahor in northern Mesopotamia, near Haran, to find a wife for Isaac. Rebekah was the chosen woman. Back in Hebron again, Abraham had to be the busiest old man in all of Canaan. He found himself a new wife—a woman named Keturah, who gave him six children.

Abraham died at the ripe old age of 175. Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the Machpelah cave next to Sarah.

In a sense, Abraham never died. On the highest religious level Abraham and his monotheism was a model for Jesus and his early Christian disciples and, much later, Muhammad and his Muslim followers. Today he still stands out as a unique spiritual figure, transcending the frontiers of great religions. However questionable the accuracy of the scriptures, however thin the archaeological and historical evidence, Jews, Christians, and Muslims still revere him as the patriarch.

One of the most touching expressions of devotion to Abraham I encountered on my travels was a short poem, "Hymn to the Blessing of Abraham" given to me at Istanbul Technical University. It was

written by a Muslim, Cengizhan Mutlu, and tells of King Nimrod, who plotted to kill Abraham for his monotheism. My Turkish guide, Aydin Kudu, provided an impromptu translation.

*Idol made of pure gold
Gives no hope, no food.
Nimrod doesn't comprehend this.
Wood burns (for the stake),
Smoke reaches the sky,
Ibrahim is thrown into the fire.
He feels no pain, he doesn't groan.
He says, "My God will save me."
Two angels had said it rightly.
Embers turn into ashes,
Sparkles turn into roses.*

"My God will save me." In these five simple words is the essence of Abraham and his astonishing endeavors. They spell out his fundamental belief that there is one God. That belief changed the world forever.

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This article originally appeared National Geographic, December 1, 2001. The author, who died before it was published, was a New York Times foreign correspondent for 20 years. The Warsaw-born multilingual Szulc was the first to report on the Bay of Pigs invasion and wrote several books, including biographies of Fidel Castro and Pope John II.

An ongoing journey

Rabbi Reuven Hammer

Jewish history begins with the journey of a husband and wife—the ancestors of a nation. Abram (“exalted father”) and Sarai (“princess”) set out for a land unknown, answering a call which is both a command and a promise: Lech lecha (“Go forth!”). Or is this a plea? Perhaps, as the Sages pointed out, the second word—lecha (literally “to you”) may indicate “at your free will,” in other words, please do this. In any case it is a request freely carried out and an indication of their willingness to obey and trust God. Actually at the end of [Chapter 11], Abram’s father Terah had begun a journey to Canaan but stopped along the way at Haran and died there. Thus Abram seems to be continuing that which his father had started. And yet there is no indication here that Abram knows where he is going.

Rabbinic tradition always depicts Abram and Terah in opposition. Terah is the idol-maker, Abram the idol-breaker. The simple text of the Torah, however, gives no indication of this. Nevertheless, it is certain that Abram’s quest is unique. God does not speak to Terah. Terah is never commanded to leave Ur; he simply goes. Is he unhappy there? Is he seeking better conditions? We will never know. But Abram feels the call of God. He goes because of the Divine word. From God’s point of view, there is a definite goal and purpose in Abram’s journey. He is to become the father of a new nation, a people who will be dedicated to God’s ways. That is the meaning of the promise “I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you” (Genesis 12:2). And that nation will have an effect upon all nations: “And all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you” (Genesis 12:3).

Biblical history is schematic. There are 10 generations from Adam to Noah and 10 from Noah to Abram. God’s disappointment with His human creations reached a climax with Noah’s generation. God’s attempt at disciplining human beings began then with the commandments given to Noah and his children that stressed the sanctity of human life—indeed of all life (Genesis 9:1-6). Now there is a further step—the creation of a family-nation that will serve as an example to others of God’s will. This begins with the selection of Abram and Sarai—Abram’s children from other women are not part of this process—and will climax with the covenant at Sinai when this family becomes God’s holy nation.

Twenty-four years after God’s first call to Abram, God makes His plan much more explicit by saying to Abram, “Walk in My ways and be blameless. I will establish My covenant between Me and you” (Genesis 17:1-2), whereupon God changes Abram’s name to Abraham and Sarai’s to Sarah, reiterates His promise to grant a land to their offspring, and commands circumcision as a tangible sign of the covenant between them.

The change of name always indicates a significant change in the nature and destiny of the person. In this case the letter heh has been added, probably representing the Divine Name itself. The Sages pointed out that this verse literally says, “Walk before Me,” whereas regarding Noah the verse says, “Noah walked with God.” Noah went along with God, but Abraham served as a herald who walks before the ruler, both clearing the way for him and announcing his coming. Thus Abraham is to be seen as greater and more worthy than Noah, the one who will instruct mankind in a new relationship with the Divine.

The covenant with Abraham represents a further step toward the Sinai covenant. As many Biblical scholars have pointed out, the covenant with Abraham, which created a new people with a special

relationship with God, is a reward given to Abraham for his qualities and his service to God, rather than a covenant in which demands are made from both parties. That occurred later at Sinai. It is an unconditional covenant; it does not say—as the Sinai covenant does—that if you do this you will receive that. Rather it promises certain things to Abraham, much as a king might grant someone a knighthood together with an estate and certain privileges that will be his and his progeny's from then to all eternity. As God said to him, "Your reward shall be very great" (Genesis 15:1). Of course the expectation is that just as this person has been a loyal servant to the king up until now, so he and his descendants will continue to be loyal to the king in the future. When a male child is born, at the circumcision we say that the child is entering into "the covenant of Abraham our father," and thus continues the chain that began with Abraham.

It is difficult for us to assess the greatness of Abraham from the stories that are found in this portion alone. The great trials are yet to come. Rather we must assume that his worthy qualities were known by God even at the beginning. He does not seem to have been a religious revolutionary in the same sense that Moses was, but he certainly developed an exclusive loyalty to his God whom he recognized as "God the Most High, Creator of heaven and earth," a title that was also used by Melchizedek the king of Salem (Genesis 14:19, 22).

This early stage in the development of what eventually became Judaism was critical. In many ways, it determined the very nature of our culture and religion. We are indeed a family, "a great nation," bound together by ties of history and mutual experience, descended from one couple. Even those who are not biological descendants of Abraham and Sarah become their spiritual descendants when they join the Jewish people. As Ruth said, "Your people shall be my people, Your God shall be my God" (Ruth 1:16). We are a people before anything else—but we are a God-centered people. And we are still continuing the journey begun by Abram and Sarai toward the kingdom of God.

A true heart

The Torah often gives us many details and much information, but just as often withholds from us things we might have expected to be told. The choice of Abram to be the recipient of God's special blessing is not explained in any way. We are left to guess why he was chosen.

At the conclusion of [Chapter 11], we were informed of his birth and marriage and of the journey that he took under his father's guidance from his birthplace in Ur to Haran (Genesis 11:26-32).

At the beginning of [Chapter 12], God—who had been silent since the time of Noah (Genesis 9:8-17) 10 generations ago—suddenly speaks to Abram and promises him blessing and greatness (Genesis 12:1-3). Why? When Noah was chosen to be saved, we were informed specifically that he was righteous (Genesis 7:1). Nothing like that is said of Abram before he is chosen. Nor do we know anything about Abram's first 75 years of life.

No wonder the sages felt impelled to embellish the story with legends about Abraham as a child, telling stories of how he rebelled against Terah's idol-making and how he discovered the truth about the existence of God. These stories are truly beautiful and inspiring, but they are certainly not supported by anything in the text of the Torah.

On the contrary, nothing negative is said about Terah, who himself left Ur and began the journey toward Canaan. Nor do we ever see Abram—even after he becomes Abraham—in conflict with anyone over the worship of idols. In [Chapter 14, we will] even see him receiving a blessing from Melchizedek of Salem who is called a "priest of God Most High" to whom Abram even gives a tithe offering (Genesis 14:18-20).

Nevertheless, we must assume that the selection of Abram was not arbitrary, but that he was worthy of God's favor. It is simply taken for granted here and his worthiness will be demonstrated later in many different incidents. Perhaps it is even demonstrated here by the very fact that he obeys God's command to "go forth from the land of your kinsmen and from your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). He goes unquestioningly even though he does not know where he is supposed to go.

Hundreds of years later, when the Levite leaders of Judea retold the story of Israel's history they proclaimed, "You are the Lord God, who chose Abram, who brought him forth from Ur of the Chaldeans and changed his name to Abraham. Finding his heart true to You, You make a covenant with him..." (Nehemiah 9:7-8) "Finding his heart true to You" explains the choice. And indeed, throughout Abraham's life, he demonstrates extraordinary loyalty to God. Therefore, we can assume that this was true even before God spoke to him.

The covenant that God made with him, the divine promise, is such an important part of the biblical scheme that it is repeated over and over in [the succeeding chapters]. We find it first in God's initial call to Abram. He is told that "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing..." (Genesis 12:2). Although this is not the complete covenant, with nothing more than these words, Abram ventures forth.

Later on, when Abram has demonstrated his loyalty by making the journey, God reveals the last part of the promise, "I will assign this land to your offspring" (Genesis 12:7). Later on, after Abram has demonstrated that he is a man of peace by giving Lot the choice portion of land, this promise of the land is repeated and even enlarged when he is told that everything he can see, in all directions, will be given to his descendants who will be as numerous as "the dust of the earth" (Genesis 13:14-17). Now Abram knows what the promise to make of him a great nation really means. Perhaps the promise is revealed gradually in order to give Abram a chance to demonstrate his loyalty at every step.

These blessings are then reiterated in the vision Abram has that is recounted in chapter 15. Here, too, Abram demonstrates his nature, as we are told, "Because he put his trust in the Lord, He reckoned it to his merit" (Genesis 15:6). All of this is explicitly confirmed when Abram's name is changed to Abraham (adding a letter of the divine name) and he is commanded to do circumcision as an outward sign of this covenant. The covenant confirms two promises previously mentioned: Abraham will be the father of nations (Genesis 17:4) and Abraham's offspring will inherit the land of Canaan (Genesis 17:8).

This first portion of Abraham's life, then, begins with a command and a promise and ends with a covenant. Abraham's full greatness, the qualities that make him worthy of emulation, remain to be revealed in the chapters to come.

The full import of the story, however, is that the third step in God's search for human beings who will be loyal to him has begun. First there was Adam, then Noah and now Abraham, who will become the father of a people dedicated to God's ways on earth.

Themes of betrayal and deception in Genesis

Moshe Dann

There is nothing more devastating than being betrayed by one's family and friends. Even love, though it can help to forgive, cannot erase the memory of such cruelty. Betrayal lingers like a curse, haunting its way into consciousness, injecting its poison of despair and loneliness. Betrayal undermines a fundamental trust in others and in self because it raises doubts: How could I have made such a mistake to trust this person? What's wrong with my own ability to evaluate the trustworthiness of another? It strangles one's essential self-confidence.

It is curious that the Bible highlights what seem to be (at least superficially) themes of betrayal and deception, depicting our illustrious ancestors with apparent faults, or at least ambiguities, and exposing a striking paradox: what appears to be dishonest, or weak, is a quite authentic process of self-discovery. In fact, that profound struggle for self-awareness by our Patriarchs and Matriarchs—despite its risks and potential for destructiveness—made possible an even deeper fulfillment in human relationships.

What appears to be negative and threatening is really a path of self-recognition. It is the challenge of the paradox that's important, the question that makes us live in anxiety and doubt, but that ultimately transforms and becomes a source of creativity. How do we become authentic? How do we forgive ourselves so that we can be healed and help others?

The beginning of Jewish destiny begins with abandonment and separation. Abraham's father, Terach, took part of his family (Abraham and Sarah, and his nephew, Lot) from their birthplace, Ur-Kasdim, to Charan. Why did they leave? Was it because Sarah could not have children? Was it connected to the untimely death of Haran, Terach's youngest son (and the father of the notorious Lot)? Why didn't Terach take his middle son, Nachor, with him? Did Terach, with divine inspiration, "do t'shuvah"?

Afterwards, now divinely commanded, Abraham leaves his father. We do not know if the family remained in contact, or whose decision it was to separate, but from that moment "in Charan, Terach died." Perhaps it was from a broken heart.

Rashi asks why the Bible mentions the death of Terach before the departure of Abraham. His answer is surprising: so that people should not know that he left his father alone and accuse him of disrespect. That is why, Rashi explains, the Bible speaks of Terach as "dead"—although in fact he lived 60 more years. The obvious question, why didn't Abraham take his father along with him, remains unanswered. Perhaps this demonstrates that filial obligations and responsibilities end at the border of personal integrity, that Abraham could not achieve his potential in his father's home.

But why didn't Abraham return, especially after the birth of Yitzchak, only 25 years later? What pattern of family relations had been established? Was this restlessness part of the great spiritual migration that would occupy Abraham's entire life, exposing himself and his family to danger in order to teach his unique form of ethical monotheism? Was it also to redefine his/our consciousness as "strangers"?

Abraham travels to Egypt, where seemingly he betrays his wife, first in his encounter with Pharaoh, and later with the Philistine king Avimelech, of Gerar. Although Abraham's excuse was that such deceptions were necessary in order to save both of them, Nachmanides is particularly critical of this decision. Moreover, there is a suspicion that Sarah may have been raped by these foreign rulers.

Were these encounters a way of introducing others to a new moral code of behavior, or simply to tell us how vulnerable people were to ruthless rulers?

Abraham reluctantly casts out Hagar and Ishmael (a form of betrayal, since they too were part of his household) at Sarah's insistence and with God's approval. Yet, with all the poignancy and potential disaster of this event, it propels Ishmael to discover his own distinctive and independent path. Sarah's decision is based on a clear and present danger to her family's survival: there must be co-existence, but as separate people.

Sarah, childless among childbearers, finally gives birth to Isaac (Yitzchak), and, according to one tradition, when she believes that Isaac has been sacrificed by her husband, she dies of heartbreak. Here is yet another seeming instance of betrayal. In her silence, we hear her terrible scream—"How could you (or You) do this to me!" And it resonates forever.

Isaac is brought by his father to Mount Moriah as an offering to God, and there are indications that both were more than willing participants in what may have seemed to be a tragic mistake. Both individuals acted with perfect faith. But was there a moment when Isaac wondered if his father was doing the right thing? Was there a moment when Abraham wished that God would stop him before it was too late? What kind of spiritual strength (or blindness) does it take to kill one's own child, even for a holy purpose? Abraham had questioned and argued with God when the inhabitants of Sodom were about to be killed; why does he not hesitate to carry out God's command, which may have seemed like betrayal of everything he had lived for? Torn between love and faith, between his own will and that of following the will of God, Abraham becomes the first man of integrity; he and his son overcome instinct and ego and become transcendent together. Both, nevertheless, are deeply wounded by this event.

Isaac (like his father) appears to betray his wife by exposing her to the danger of being raped by Avimelech, and is cheated out of his water rights by the Philistines. Yet, he is not a man of confrontation. He takes risks and resides among them, however, in order (we assume) to teach them about God. Isaac's "blindness" to (refusal to accept) Esau's evil prompts a desperate trick. Isaac appears to be betrayed by his wife, Rebekah, and his son, Jacob, when they deceive him in order to get the blessing that would ensure the survival of the Jewish people.

It is clear, however, from hints in the text that Isaac knew exactly what was happening: Esau was a killer, whose rage threatened everyone, and in order for anyone to survive, a subtle stratagem had to be employed. They had to maintain the fiction that Esau had a moral claim to his birthright. Afterwards, Esau again betrays his parents by marrying inappropriate women. Jacob escapes and has no contact with his parents for 21 years. Isaac is left with a house full of "shiksés."

Jacob's confrontation with himself begins when he leaves his parents' home. Alone, at night, he dreams of angels and ladders, and God, who now reveals Himself. That was his first moment of self-consciousness, expressed clearly when he says, "'Surely the Eternal is in this place and I didn't know it,' and he was filled with fear." This is the first instance of retrospection and introspection in the Torah—and it came out of self-doubt. It is precisely that newly awakened self-awareness, his unique ability to understand and appreciate what has happened to him, that determines the course of his life. That event, however, was only the beginning of Jacob's struggle to discover his essence.

Jacob is betrayed by his father-in-law, Lavan, who tricks him into marrying Leah, instead of Rachel. But Leah and Rachel are also implicated, because the ruse could not have been accomplished without their consent. Clearly these Matriarchs understood Jewish destiny at least as well as their

husbands. Confounding Jacob's passion turns into the birth of the Jewish people.

Jacob uses genetic breeding (divine power) to obtain a large herd of sheep and goats, and, although there is no question that he had been exploited by Lavan, and was entitled to his wages, Lavan felt tricked and cheated. The family, it would seem, has a conspiratorial nature.

Rachel deceives her father when he searches for hidden idols that she had stolen, again, it may be argued, for a good purpose. What would Jacob have done had he discovered his wife's fraud? Do the ends justify the means?

Having escaped from Lavan, Jacob then struggles heroically for his existence/authenticity with an angel who cripples him. In the process, a new aspect of his identity emerges, from Jacob (who also struggles with his brother), to Israel (who consciously engages God). He emerges a survivor, scarred, haunted by his vulnerability and weakness, yet willing to risk everything to discover who he is. The need to discover himself is, therefore, the essence of his personality, his inner nature, and the reason he fights altogether; it gives him the courage and integrity to confront a world filled with evil. Despite the risks, it is part of his aliyah.

At last he encounters his twin brother, his Other Self, Esau, and eventually enters Eretz Yisrael. He does not, however, return immediately to his father, but moves first to Shechem where he purchases a piece of land and settles. Later, his daughter, Dinah, is kidnapped and raped. In response, two of Jacob's sons, Shimon and Levi, trick the inhabitants into circumcising themselves, and then slaughter them. Although there was no alternative to this ploy in order to rescue Dinah, Jacob may have felt betrayed by his sons, and rebuked them harshly. We do not know, in fact, whether or not he approved of what they did. At least publicly, he put himself on record; in private he may have felt differently. Did he, perhaps, blame himself for what happened?

Jacob journeys on to Bet El, building an altar there, and, for the second time, his new name is honored and the Covenant reaffirmed. Rachel dies and is buried "on the way," near Bethlehem, in what may have seemed (at least to Joseph) as irreverent to Rachel's honor. Afterwards, his son, Reuven, interferes in Jacob's bedroom arrangements, perhaps even violating an intimate relationship with the remaining wives and is severely chastised. Jacob then moves on to Mamre/Hebron, where he arrives in time to see his father before he dies. Both sons, Jacob and Esau, bury their father in a final act of cooperation and conciliation.

Jacob, rearing Joseph alone, had favored him more than his other sons, not only because he was still grieving for Rachel, Joseph's mother, but because they were both dreamers. Favoritism, however, causes intense sibling rivalry. In light of Joseph's ultimate role in saving his family, Jacob's preferences may be justified. But Jacob did sow the seeds of future problems.

Joseph is betrayed by his brothers when they sell him, although they believe they are right, since Joseph had betrayed them. They then lie to Jacob about the disappearance of Joseph. Did Jacob know what happened? Is that why he didn't question his sons?

Joseph is betrayed by Potiphar's wife, who falsely accuses him of trying to seduce her. Imprisoned unjustly, he meets Pharaoh's wine taster who promises (and then forgets) to help him. Joseph has no contact with his father for about 24 years until his father brings his entire family into Egypt, thus setting the stage for slavery and exile. Why doesn't he send a message to his father? Although seemingly insensitive, this was necessary for future redemption and freedom, a direction that determines the course of Jewish history.

Jacob's own assessment of his life (in response to Pharaoh) is characterized by a sense of

overwhelming failure and pain: “Few and evil have been the days of my life, and I have not attained the position of my fathers.” He reflects the bitter disappointment of the dreamer who had envisioned so much more than what he was able to accomplish. But he does not lose faith, in himself, in Jewish history, and in the promise of Jewish destiny. His poignant words are not a condemnation of his life, but a testimony to his process of “becoming.” He has not only endured each test, he has prevailed, and strengthened his belief.

Jacob’s final act—blessing his children—reflects the insights he gained about them throughout his life. Each son stands at the head of a tribe; together they comprise the future of the Jewish people. But they are also on the threshold of slavery, ironically, just as they are feeling “at home.” Their potential is yet unrealized, and the future is uncertain.

What appears as dysfunction, perfidy, and deception in the biblical narrative is rather an archetype for a process of an unfolding awareness of Self. It is complicated, because we, like Jacob, exist in a world of paradox—where evil appears to be good, and good, evil—confusing and threatening to our notion of the world and who we are.

Jacob’s struggle is distinctive (from his predecessors) in that he dreams—an awareness of (or vehicle to apprehend) self and purpose that no one else had before. Previous patriarchs spoke to God, but did not initiate the confrontation; Jacob dreams that connection. His struggle to “become” goes beyond his father’s terrifying blindness and his grandfather’s simple faith. He needs to discover the world in a different way, combining elements of the past with an engagement of the world, thrilling and dangerous, but ultimately transcending.

Deceptions threaten to break Jacob—and he must develop his ability to see beyond what is happening, into the future, to create a sense of self that is integrated, that has taken on the world and still brings blessings to it. He stands in an existential loneliness that is different from that of his predecessors, perhaps because his own struggle is so much more complex. It is precisely this powerful tool of introspection that Joseph develops into visionary dream interpretation.

In each succeeding generation faith becomes more difficult and complex. Abraham breaks with his past; Isaac struggles to overcome his sense of victimization; Jacob struggles for self-consciousness, for authenticity in a world of deception. Jacob must, of necessity, confront the paradox in which deception appears as truth, love as hate, creativity as destruction—all of which combine energies that can create a transcendent being. It is the only way that Jacob can find meaning and purpose. But it is also a life of self-doubt and pain. And Jacob changes—unlike almost anyone else in Tanach, except King David.

The past constantly haunts Jacob. He is often on the verge of despair, of losing everything; he is broken, wounded. Yet, that shattering confrontation allows for the discovery of his unique path to God. Out of his pain emerges a path towards real self-examination, and authenticity.

It is precisely his ability to maintain his integrity in the face of radically changing circumstances that transforms him and creates a new identity.

Only in that struggle for self can one create meaning; only from profound doubt can one approach true faith. Jacob’s struggle, therefore, is the first recorded crisis of human existence. That is why he, and we, are called Israel.

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Abraham's call and the nature of his spiritual journey

Sandee Brawarsky

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It is easy to imagine a Cecil B. De Mille-style call: God's booming voice echoes over the mountains, bracketed by thunder, mysteriously heard only by Abraham. But perhaps the pronouncement is whispered, and Abraham isn't sure whether it is God's words or the murmurs of his soul. Daring in his faith, he chooses to believe that the message is ultimately from God, and he complies. "His faith in following the voice marks the first step on the path we still seek to walk," Rabbi Arthur Green has written.

According to instructions, Abraham goes out from his land and his father's house, not certain where he is headed, but ready to be led by a God known only to him. At some point he stops leaving and begins the long process of arriving, which will engage him for the rest of his days. Although he is 75 years old, it is this point in his life that modern observers might define as his coming-of-age; his sense of self is transformed. In fact, when he is called by God, he is living in the city of Haran, which can be translated as "route," "journey," or "crossroads." Indeed, the moment is the crossroads of Abraham's life, as he begins a journey like no other.

Commentators on the text have read God's brief charge to Abraham, "Lech lecha," in various ways, with different emphases and meanings—as "Go," "Go forth," "Get thee out," "Go for yourself (for your own benefit)," "Go by yourself," "Go your own way," "Go-you-forth." The Zohar, the 13th-century Jewish mystical text, interprets the text as "Go to your self, know your self, fulfill your self." Abraham must understand his own soul in order to move ahead; it's a sacred journey inward as well as to the promised land. As biblical scholar E. A. Speiser has written: "It was the start of an epic voyage in search of spiritual truth, a quest that was to constitute the central theme of all biblical history."

Does Abraham look back? Do his courage and faith endure? Does he miss the security of his old life and long for its simplicity? It's never easy to break entirely with one's past, with one's family. However, losses are inextricably connected to growth. For Abraham, leaving home is a valuable and fruitful loss. God provides the road map, in a code he must learn to decipher.

Abraham's actions might seem to resemble those of the thousands who flocked to America's still unsettled Western lands, hearkening to the call "Go West!," and the countless peoples who have uprooted their families in search of a better life in a new and unknown place. But it is not the pursuit of wealth or power or adventure that seems to motivate Abraham, rather his faith in God. His reward is the promise of the future, the divine blessing granted through him to his descendants. However, God's words are cloaked in mystery, for he and Sarah are old and childless when they leave Haran.

Why does God select an older man as the conduit of his blessing? Perhaps God sees a blend of enlightenment and openness in Abraham, who has reached elderhood, which Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi characterizes as "the time for harvesting the wisdom of a lifetime." Perhaps it is Abraham's life experience and his accumulated memory that enable him not only to hear God's call but to act on it.

Do we, the many descendants of Abraham, continue to hear God's voice? Are there certain times of life when God's voice is clearest? Do we need to be in solitude—or is it possible to be called by God while on a crowded city street? Are there calls that we sometimes just don't hear? Or don't

want to hear? In contemporary times, some speak of their “calling” as a message of vocation; they view their choice of life’s work as God-inspired. Some people encounter God’s words in their personal lives, in the kinds of transcendent moments Vaclav Havel, playwright and former president of the Czech Republic who had been jailed as a dissident, describes in a letter to his wife from prison as “‘islands of meaning’ in the ocean of our struggling, the meaning of lanterns whose light is cast into the darkness of our life’s journey, illuminating all the many meanings of its direction.” According to the Midrash, it was God, “Life of all worlds,” who “illuminated Abraham’s path wherever he went.”

In our own lives, those moments of clarity—when, perhaps, divinity is our light and compass—are the most significant signposts on our journeys. To novelist and theologian Frederick Buechner, “life itself can be thought of as an alphabet by which God graciously makes known his presence and purpose and power among us. Like the Hebrew alphabet, the alphabet of grace has no vowels, and in that sense his words to us are always veiled, subtle, cryptic, so that it is left to us to delve their meaning, to fill in the vowels, for ourselves by means of all the faith and imagination we can muster. God speaks to us in such a way, presumably, not because he chooses to be obscure but because, unlike a dictionary word whose meaning is fixed, the meaning of an incarnate word is the meaning it has for the one it is spoken to, the meaning that becomes clear and effective in our lives only when we ferret it out for ourselves.” (from *The Sacred Journey*)

Abraham could not have known God so deeply had he stayed home. The call comes to us—that is the blessing of God’s grace. We rise to answer the call—that is the blessing of human engagement.

Recognizing God's Call

Martin E. Marty

Perhaps the patriarchs didn't ask themselves this question, but more than likely even they did: How on earth can we tell if a call is real? In this short essay, Professor Martin E. Marty ponders the characteristics of a genuine call. Martin E. Marty is the Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service professor at the University of Chicago and author of many books on religious and cultural themes.

The beginning of the story of Abraham is brisk: "Now the Lord said to Abraham, 'Go.' So Abraham went." Go: That meant leaving land, relatives and immediate family. He went: That meant heading a great nation and becoming a blessing to all the families of the earth.

The story of Abraham is "only a story," say some scholars. But to most of the three billion people who are "Abrahamic"—Jews, Christians, and Muslims—that story shapes much of their lives and gives meaning to their hopes. Often, these children of Abraham are not a blessing to each other: The accounts of crusades and jihads and holy wars involve them fighting with each other as much as with others. But you cannot talk them out of the notion that the call to Abraham made them a people with special blessings and responsibilities. If we agree on nothing else, we can agree that the call was fateful.

Most of the time, we slide too fast over the little words "the Lord said...." Should we trust a story that finds God saying something and half of the human race changing because a man heard what God said? There is no claim here that there were stone tablets or scrolls or other physical evidences of God saying anything in writing. "God said." That means: Abraham heard voices—or a voice. Should we trust the story, the voice? Does it come to others? To us? Keep your guard up and your fingers crossed. Who hears voices now? First, the fanatic. The fanatic has been defined as someone who knows he's doing what the Lord would do if the Lord were also in possession of the facts. Second, people with schizophrenia hear voices, sometimes a voice of the Lord. Third, religious prophets and apostles—in scriptures past and in contemporary life—hear them.

Most believers give a special status to the calls of long ago, attested to in the various scriptures. Today, though, self-proclaimed "prophets"—a David Koresh or a Jim Jones—claim to hear such a call and death follows. Founders of many new religions, most of them ephemeral, claim to hear such a call and delusion or frustration follows. You cannot talk them out of their claims, but only a few or a few thousand follow, so taking their claims seriously is not an issue for virtually all of the human race.

So it comes to ordinary people. Do they—do "we"—hear "the Lord said ..."? Should they—should "we"—follow? Not being Abraham, how should we think of a "call"? How do we test one, if it comes? Most of the scriptures that talk about God talking also teach skepticism along with faith: "Test the spirits, to see whether they are of God." So the best advice is: If the call is too direct, too "miraculous"-sounding, beware. Through the centuries, the people who most felt called and did most with their call found their vocation not through a voice from the clouds or the mountains or even within themselves. Instead, they saw their whole lives as grounded in the mysterious care of a loving God, who does leave traces in history: in events, in scriptures, in the calls and demands of other people, in the faithful heart.

The serious people, at the end of whose life one can observe that they sensed a divine call, tend to be those who let God speak through a million little particulars in life. Odds are, those who lived their lives in response to such a demand and promise were challenged along the way by others. How can you tell if you or someone else was divinely called? Never rule out the possibility that a sense of a call and a calling will be a positive good: The world gets changed, often for the better, because of such responses. Trust the half-certain more than the cocksure; those who test their call in community more than those who go it alone. And never completely uncross your fingers or let your guard down: Response to the call can be dangerous, as many victims of called and chosen people and peoples could have attested. So, the story of Abraham and Sarah challenges, disturbs and inspires us; it can change our ordinary lives and make us extraordinarily, if cautiously, responsive.

Pentateuchal Stories About Abraham

Umberto Cassuto

...Out of the store of traditions that used to be related among the Israelites concerning Abram-Abraham, the Torah selected the material that was best suited to its plan and aims, gave this material a form consonant with its own spirit, and fitted it, in characteristic manner, into a general literary structure that is harmonious and complete. The perfected form of this structure does not support the view espoused by most modern exegetes, who regard the text as the accidental product of the combination of a number of fragments from various sources that are cited word for word and joined together by a complicated process of repeated redactions....

The material is set out with numerical symmetry based on the numbers seven and ten, and the theme develops progressively stage by stage. Abraham is put to repeated tests, which amount to 10 in all. Although these are not, if we follow the simple meaning of Scripture, identical with the tests enumerated in the haggadic expositions of the Rabbis, yet the total is undoubtedly the same even according to the objective interpretation of the text, and the number continues the system that assigned 10 generations for the period between Adam and Noah, and 10, again, for that between Noah and Abraham. The first ordeal is preceded by a Divine promise to Abraham of a general nature, and after each trial he receives consolation in the form of a renewed assurance by God, or of a specific act for his benefit. Thus there is fashioned a chain of alternating light and shade, in continuing succession, until the last and most sublime promise, which is given to Abraham at the end of the final and severest ordeal—that of the offering of Isaac.

The trials are as follows:

(1) The first, which Abram had to undergo immediately after the promise contained in the Lord's communion with him in Haran, was his migration from his country and his kindred and his father's house to a new land, unknown to him. He believed in the promise and stood the test successfully (12:1-4); consequently, the second promise was given him, namely, that he would possess this land in place of his native country (12:7).

(2) After he had passed through the whole of Canaan, and had taken, as it were, ideal possession of it, the act of acquisition being symbolized by the altars that he built to the Lord in the land, he was forthwith compelled to leave the country on account of the famine and to go down to Egypt, and there Sarai his wife found herself in danger. But the Lord protected her, and Abram returned in peace with all his family to the site of the altar that he had erected near Bethel (12:10-13:4).

(3) The land did not suffice for both him and Lot his brother's son, and he was compelled to separate from Lot and to reconcile himself to forgo, for the sake of peace, a portion of the land; but Lot chose an area that did not belong to Canaan proper, and the Lord again promised the entire land to Abram, as well as a large offspring to replace his nephew, who had left him (13:5-18).

(4) In order to rescue Lot, Abram was forced to risk a hard fight against the eastern kings, but the Lord delivered [מִגֵּן *miggen*] his foes into his hand (ch. 14:), and then assured him that He was his 'shield' [מָגֵן *maghen*], and confirmed and even enlarged and elaborated still further the promises in regard to the acquisition of the land and the abundance of his descendants (ch. 15).

(5) When Hagar was about to give birth to his first-born, this son was in danger of being taken from him because of family strife. But the danger passed, and the Lord assured him that a multitude of nations would issue from him, not only by his first son but also by his second son, whom Sarah

would bear unto him, and in this son the covenant of the Lord would be fulfilled (ch. 16).

(6) Again Abram was tested by the commandment of circumcision, and he stood the test (ch. 17), after which he was privileged to be visited by the three 'men', and the promise concerning the birth of his chosen son was confirmed and explained to him and to Sarah (18:1-15).

(7) Once again Lot was in jeopardy on account of the wickedness of his neighbors; but this peril also passed, and Lot was saved for Abraham's sake (18:17-19:28).

(8) At the very time that the birth of Isaac is drawing near, Abraham's wife finds herself again in danger at the hands of Abimelech king of Gerar, but from this peril, too, she is delivered, and Isaac is born in peace (20:1-21:7).

(9) The birth of Isaac led to the departure of his first-born, but he was solaced by the covenant he made with his neighbors and the building of a new sanctuary at Beer-sheba and the proclamation there of the Lord's name (21:8-34).

(10) In the end came the supreme trial, the offering of Isaac. Abraham withstood even this terrible ordeal, and received on account of it the most sublime blessings and the most comprehensive assurances, which include and sum up all that had been promised him previously.

When we consider the details of this list, we observe an unmistakable progression in the successive tests, and in many instances a certain correspondence between the trial and the benison or consolation that followed.

Note should also be taken of the chiasmic parallelism between the 10 episodes. The last trial corresponds to the first (*Go from your country etc.; and go to the land of Moriah etc.*; in the former passage there is the command to leave his father, in the latter to bid farewell to his son; in both episodes the blessings and promises are similar in content and in phrasing). The penultimate two tests parallel the pair of tests following the first (in the earlier trials Sarai is in danger from Pharaoh, and Lot goes away; in the later ordeals Sarah's peril stems from Abimelech, and Hagar and Ishmael depart; in both sets of tests a sanctuary is founded and the name of the Lord is proclaimed). The seventh episode corresponds to the fourth (in both Lot is in jeopardy and is saved). Similarly, the sixth trial parallels the fifth (both appertain to Ishmael and Isaac).

The Divine communications of benison and promise to Abram- Abraham are seven:

(1) The first, which he received at Haran (12:2-3), comprises seven expressions of blessing....

(2) The second (12:7: *To your descendants I will give this land*) briefly explains and specifies two important points in the first promise, namely, enduring offspring and possession of the land.

(3) The third (13:14-17) further expands and elucidates the promise of the land and confirms that of the offspring.

(4) The fourth, the theophany in connection with the Covenant between the Sacrificial Pieces (ch. 15:), extends and clarifies the promise of children and fixes the time for the acquisition of the land.

(5) The fifth (ch. 17, the section of Circumcision) contains the good tidings that not one nation alone but a multitude of nations will come forth from Abram, and that the covenant of the Lord will find particular realization in the son that Sarah will bear unto him.

(6) The sixth (ch. 18) brings the news that in another year Sarah would give birth to this son.

(7) The seventh, more comprehensive and exalted than all the previous communications, was vouchsafed Abraham after the attempted sacrifice of Isaac (22:16-18) and contains once again, like the first, seven expressions of benison.

All this shows clearly how out of the material selected from the store of ancient tradition concerning Abraham a homogeneous narrative was created in the text before us, integrated and harmoniously arranged in all its parts and details....

* * *

Many scholars consider the narratives of the Patriarchs to be symbolizations of tribal histories, and in certain instances this is quite evident, for example, in the episodes depicting the relations between Jacob and Esau; but in regard to Abraham it is difficult to accept this view, since the name Abraham does not occur as the name of a tribe or people, with the possible exception of a solitary instance in Micah 7:20.

According to the interpretation of Gunkel and Gressmann, most of the stories about the Patriarchs are only myths belonging to the type of folk-tale that is transmitted from place to place. In the case of the Israelites these legends were attached to names commonly found among them, and in the course of time their heroes came to be regarded as patriarchs of the people. This line of exposition has also not been accepted by the majority of exegetes, because motifs of the kind found in folk legends are present to only a small extent in the patriarchal narratives, whilst the names Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were, particularly among the Israelites, not common in the period of antiquity.

The feature common to the views of most scholars till a few years ago was the assumption that the narratives of the Patriarchs were composed in a much later period than that in which the Patriarchs lived, and that they underwent repeated changes before they were crystallized in their present form; consequently, it was held, they cannot preserve reliable historical information. But all these conjectures have become obsolete today. The ancient documents discovered in recent times in Mesopotamia...have enabled us to familiarize ourselves with the Mesopotamian society of the first half of the second millennium B.C.E., to know its customs and conditions of life, and we find that the background of the patriarchal narratives of the Book of Genesis is precisely the same as that which emerges before us from those texts....

[I]t will suffice to point briefly to a few examples. The relationship between Abraham and Damascus-Eliezer, for instance, becomes perfectly clear in the light of the customs that are reflected in the documents of Nuzi; and the act of Abraham's wife in giving him her handmaid in order to be built up by her can be explained not only on the basis of several clauses in the Code of Hammurabi, but particularly by reference to other documents from Nuzi. In general, the entire cultural, social, ethnographic and linguistic setting of the narratives in Genesis concerning Abraham corresponds to what we learn from the texts of the ancient East belonging to the first half of the second millennium B.C.E. Needless to say, it was not possible for the Israelites of a later epoch to compose literary works that would so faithfully reflect the conditions of earlier generations, which were doubtless unknown to them. This enables us to assess the antiquity of the narratives and the historic value of their main content.

However, the Torah does not narrate its stories for the purpose, of teaching us antiquities. Its aim is not to record history for its own sake, in the scientific sense of the term, or to chronicle the exact manner in which certain events happened. Its goal is more exalted, namely, the religious and national education of the people of Israel, and to this end it employs traditional material. Hence the Pentateuch did not incorporate in its sections the entire fund of narrative that tradition had stored up relative to Abraham..., but merely a part of it. Only those tales were included from which religious or national instruction could be derived.

In particular, Scripture's motive was to teach: (a) how Abraham came to know his Creator, and to devote himself to His service, and how he was chosen as the bearer of the covenant that the Lord made with him, so that he might establish a new religious society that would transcend the level of idolatry prevailing in his days, and that he might guide his children and children's children to keep the way of the Lord and do righteousness and justice (18:19); (b) how Abraham received Divine promises concerning the future of his descendants, their increase in number without end, and the acquisition of the land of Canaan as their everlasting possession; (c) how the events of Abraham's life paralleled the destiny of the people of Israel, in the sense that the experiences of the sires prefigured those of the scions; and how the reader may conclude from this that the history of the Israelites was not the result of chance, but the execution of plans that were predetermined from the beginning by God's will and were foreshadowed from the first in the events that befell the primogenitor of the people....

* * *

[Chapter 12] tells of the event that marked the turning point in Abraham's life. By the Lord's command, Abraham left his land and his kindred and his father's house in Haran, and went up to the land of Canaan; there the Lord assured him that this land would be given to his descendants, and, in keeping with this promise, Abram traversed the whole land of Canaan, from north to south, as though to symbolize thereby the ideal conquest, so to speak, of the whole area promised to him and to his children after him; and in two important places he built altars unto the Lord, a token of the sanctification of the land to the Lord and to His worship for generations to come.

The Israelite tradition, which finds explicit expression at the end of the Book of Joshua (24:2; compare *ibid.* vv. 14-15), related that idolatry was practiced in the house of Terah, Abraham's father: *Your fathers lived of old beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods. But—*Joshua continues in the name of the Lord (*ibid.* v. 3)— *then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan.* This accords with the story of our section, which begins with the words of the Lord to Abram: *Go from your country and your kindred*, etc. The meaning is that Abram succeeded in rising above the idolatrous notions of his environment....From the blessing that Noah bestowed upon Shem is to be inferred...that according to the Israelite tradition the knowledge of the Lord was preserved among the descendants of Shem, or at least among the elite of them. In the light of our narrative, Abram alone was associated with this religious chain of tradition, in contrast to the rest of his family, who did not belong to the elect few that acknowledged the Lord, and consequently he was enjoined to separate himself from them and to devote himself to the service of the Lord in a new land appointed for this purpose.

Abram's journey to Canaan with his household, family and slaves, as well as the persons they had gotten in Haran, who thus formed a kind of branch-group or tribe of nomads, falls within the historic framework of the migrations of peoples and tribes who entered the land of Canaan and Syria in the first half of the second millennium B.C.E., namely, Hurrian tribes, who came from the mountainous region of the North, and various West Semitic tribes....

The essential difference between the immigration into Canaan of the other groups and that of Abram's company consisted in this, that the cause of the latter's migration was not, or was not solely, economic, social or political, but was primarily religious, and its aim was the founding of a new faith; therein lies its unique significance.

It is true that Scripture does not expressly state for what purpose Abram was commanded to go forth from his land and kindred; hence several scholars, like Gunkel, thought that the original meaning of our section was not that Abram was bidden to go from there with the specific intention of detaching him from the pagan environment; in their opinion this conception arose in a later epoch. But what the Bible does not say expressly it indicates by inference. It is a characteristic of these narratives (and Gunkel himself realized it in a general way) not to describe the thoughts and feelings of the *dramatis personae*, but only to record their deeds, and to inform the reader through the narration of events of the ideas and sentiments that prompted their actions. In the present instance, the building of the altars by Abram in the land of Canaan immediately after his immigration symbolizes...the dedication of the land to the Lord and to His service. From this we clearly learn the purpose, according to the Torah, of Abram's settlement in Canaan....

Details of Abram's travels are given only in respect to the last and most important stages, namely, his wanderings in Canaan itself. These raise three questions: What was the Bible's intention in furnishing us with these particulars and in delimiting Abram's journeys in the land of Canaan in the manner it does: first as far as the neighborhood of Shechem, thence up to the environs of Bethel, and finally from there to the Negev? Why was the area of the land divided thereby into three regions: one extending from the northern border to Shechem, the second from Shechem as far as Bethel, and the third from Bethel to the southern boundary? And why is it that it was at these particular stations— in the vicinity of Shechem and of Bethel—that Abram built altars unto the Lord?

In seeking the answer to these questions, we should first note the fact that it is these stopping-places and this division of the country that are mentioned again in similar form in the account of Jacob's travels after his return from Paddan-aram. Although he did not enter from the north but from the north-east, yet he also came first to the place of Shechem....He, too, continues his journey southward and comes as far as Hebron...and Beer-ShebaAnd like his grandfather, he also builds altars to the Lord in the localities of Shechem and Bethel....Thus he likewise passes through the land and conquers it, as it were, ideally in the name of the Lord (apart from the actual conquest of Shechem by his sons), and he, too, erects upon it altars, tokens of this ideal conquest. Just as the altar-tokens of Abram serve to divide the land into three regions, each south of the other, so do the altar-tokens of Jacob, which were set up at the same sites. And just as Abraham bought for the full price a specific place in the land—the field of Machpelah near Hebron—so also Jacob acquired against full payment a given area in the vicinity of Shechem, after which two of his sons conquered the whole region. The parallel is unmistakable.

There is still another parallel, no less manifest. When the children of Israel invaded the country in the days of Joshua and conquered it in actuality, then, too, according to the account of the tradition reflected in the Book of Joshua, the key points seized were precisely those that we have noted in the ideal conquests of Abram and Jacob...—the very threefold division that we found in Genesis.

Now we can understand why the Torah stressed, in all their detail, Abram's journeys on entering the land of Canaan, at first as far as Shechem, and subsequently up to Ai-Bethel. Scripture intended to present us here, through the symbolic conquest of Abram, with a kind of forecast of what would happen to his descendants later. According to this tradition the token was first given to Abram and afterwards repeated to Jacob, and the significance of the duplication is to corroborate and ratify, as the Bible itself makes clear when citing the words of Joseph to Pharaoh (41:32): *And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass.* In conformity with this, the Book of Joshua portrays for us the actual subjugation in a manner

paralleling the ideal conquest by the Patriarchs— even the wording is similar—as though to say, the possession of the land gained in the days of Joshua was already implied, in essence, in the symbolic conquest that the first patriarchs had effected in their time, and that it was all predestined and foretold from the beginning in accordance with the Lord’s will.

It remains to add that the two places discussed were not only considered key points geographically, but also as religious centers of the Canaanite population. Hence the proclamation by Abram of the name of 'ה YHWH at these places signifies the proclamation of the supremacy of 'ה YHWH, the God of Abram, over the gods of Canaan.

In this section, as in those preceding, numerical symmetry is discernible. This obtains not only, as we have noted, in the use of the number 10 (10 generations), which is the basic numeral of the decimal system, but also in the use of the number *seven*, which was considered the number of perfection....The blessing bestowed by the Lord on Abraham in vv. 2-3 comprises seven expressions of benison..., and it is evident that the Bible intended by this formulation to set before us a form of blessing that was perfect in every respect. It should also be observed that each of the key words in this section—*Abraham* and *land*— occurs, as usual, seven times in the section.

The exponents of the documentary theory distribute the verses of this section, and even fragments of them, between the two sources J and P, and the editorial work of the Redactor (R). In regard to the details of the analysis the views of the exegetes differ, but generally speaking the majority opinion appears to be that vv. 1-4a and vv. 6-8 should be assigned to J, vv. 4b-5 to P, and v. 9 to R. However, the very fact that the section corresponds as a whole and also in its particulars to the tradition relating to the journeys of Jacob and the conquest of the land by Joshua, and the added fact that the form of the section shows distinct signs of numerical harmony, are testimony to its unity. Nor can it be countered that all this is evidence only of the labors of the redactor, for if the redactor gave the narrative a perfected form, he was no ordinary editor but an author, and his work was planned from the start and skillfully put together, and is not the chance product of the mechanical combination of fragments, as the adherents of the documentary hypothesis suppose....

* * *

Abram Goes Down Into Egypt

... This account of the going down of Abram and Sarai to Egypt presents a striking parallel to what is related subsequently, at the end of the Book of Genesis and the beginning of the Book of Exodus, concerning the migration of the children of Israel to that land. There is hardly a verse or half a verse in this section that does not remind us of a parallel statement in the narratives pertaining to the Israelites.

Not only in respect of those expressions on which the rabbinic sages commented haggadically..., but down to the smallest details of the section, throughout its entire extent, we find an unmistakable parallelism to our story in the saga of the children of Israel. Here it is related in v. 10: *Now there was a famine in the land...for the famine was severe in the land*; and in the case of the children of Israel we are told: *Now the famine was severe in the land* (xlvi 1); and again: *for the famine is severe in the land of Canaan* (xlvii 4). In our passage it is stated, in the same verse, that Abram went down to Egypt *to sojourn there*, and later on it is recorded that Joseph’s brothers said to Pharaoh: *We have come to sojourn in the land* (xlvii 4). Abram’s anxiety lest the Egyptians slay him whilst letting his wife live (vv. 11-13, especially 12: *then they will kill me, but they will let you live*) recalls Pharaoh’s decrees cited in

the Book of Exodus: *if it is a son, you shall kill him; but if it is a daughter, she shall live* (Exod. i 16), and subsequently: *Every son that is born you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live* (*ibid.* v. 22).

The story narrated in our section of how Abram's wife Sarai was taken into the palace of the king of Egypt to be one of his handmaids (vv. 14-15) corresponds to what we are told subsequently of the children of Israel who were likewise made bondmen of Pharaoh. In our narrative, we learn of the gifts that Abram was given (v. 16: *And for her sake he dealt well with Abram*, etc.), and that on going forth from Egypt he was *very rich in silver, in cattle and in gold* (13:2); and in the story of the Exodus we read of *jewellery of silver and of gold, and clothing* [Exod. xii 35] that the Israelites received from the Egyptians on their departure.

In both narratives, the Torah tells us that the Lord heard the cry of the oppressed and smote Pharaoh with great plagues in order that he should set them free ([a form of] the [word נגף (negah, meaning] *plague[s]* occurs here in v. 17 and also in Exod. 11:1). The initial phase of the liberation is described in like terms in both accounts. In our story it is written: *So Pharaoh called Abram, and said* (v. 18); and in the other: *And he summoned Moses and Aaron by night, and said* (12:31). Here Pharaoh says to Abram: TAKE נָךְ [kach] *her*, AND BE GONE [וָאֵלַי walekh] (v. 19); and there Pharaoh says to Moses and Aaron: TAKE [וְחִיָּךְ k'chu]...*as you have said* AND BE GONE [וְחִיָּךְ valedhu]....

Further details regarding the parallelism between the two narratives we shall note below. These parallels are found throughout the section, verse after verse, and thus cannot be fortuitous. It is evident that the Torah purposely underlined the similarity between the two events. When we bear in mind the implications of the parallels to the preceding section (12:1-9), it becomes apparent that also in this, the second section, Scripture wished to foreshadow in the tales of the Patriarchs the history of their descendants, and to provide a sequel to the preceding section in conformity with its scheme.

In the account of how Abram went down to Egypt, what befell him there and how he went forth from there, the Torah presages, as it were, the migration of the Israelites to Egypt after they had settled in the land of Canaan, their servitude and their liberation. The narrative is so worded as to emphasize the parallelism in all its aspects. The whole course of events experienced by the descendants is revealed to us as though depicted from the beginning in the life of their ancestors. This story is not told, therefore, out of a romantic love for ancient sagas, nor from a desire to satisfy the curiosity of people who find pleasure in delving into the records of antiquity. Its object, like that of all the Pentateuchal narratives, is to instruct its readers. Following are the main teachings that it inculcates:

(a) The bondage of the children of Israel in Egypt was not an accidental calamity but part of a plan prepared beforehand, in accordance with God's will, already in the days of Abraham (compare also 15:13-16), and harmoniously correlated with the overall Divine plan for the destiny of the people of Israel.

(b) From the deliverance of Abram and Sarai from the dangers that threatened them in Egypt, and the parallel salvation of the children of Israel who were enslaved in the same land, it is possible to learn that the Lord is ever ready to protect his faithful ones and to deliver them from all evil, thus providing a source of consolation and hope for countless generations....

* * *

The Wife-Sister triplet conundrum

A difficult problem from the literary viewpoint is created by the two analogous narratives that occur later on in the Book of Genesis: the account in chapter 20 of Sarai's peril in the palace of Abimelech, king of the Philistines, in Gerar, and the story in chapter 26 (vv. 7-11) of Rebekah's danger, also in the house of Abimelech, king of the Philistines, in Gerar.

On the face of it this seems strange. It is surprising to find three such similar stories narrated in one book as three successive episodes; and it is even more astonishing that the characters who act and suffer in the second narrative are the same as in the first, and that those of the third are none other than the son and daughter-in-law of the first pair, as though the four of them had been incapable of learning the moral of the first incident, nor even the lesson of the recurrence of events in the second episode. On account of these strange features, the scholars who support the documentary theory are accustomed to attribute the three narratives to three different sources: as a rule, our section is assigned to J, chapter 20 to E, and the story in chapter 26 to another stratum of J. Others distribute them differently....Additional reasons for this attribution to different sources are: (a) the variation in the use of the Divine Names (the Tetragrammaton in our section, Elohim in chapter 20, and the Tetragrammaton again in ch. 26); (b) a number of characteristics, linguistic or of another kind, that are considered to be specifically typical of each of the documents.

However, this analysis does not solve the principal problem of the triplication of the story. Even if we concede that the three tales were derived from three different documents, there still remains the question: why did the final editor find it necessary to incorporate all three accounts in his book? The difficulty remains unresolved, the responsibility of a redactor not being less than that of an author.

As for the supplementary arguments, it is clear that they establish no case. The alleged divergence in the use of the Divine Names is entirely unfactual: in chapter 20 there occurs apart from the name Elohim also the name Adonai in v. 18 (although it is argued that this verse is a later interpolation, such exegesis, which obliterates all evidence that does not fit in with its preconceived theory, is undoubtedly invalid); the third story is in truth found in a chapter that uses the Tetragrammaton, but *in the narrative itself no Divine Name whatsoever is used even once*; and if we consult the Septuagint, we shall not find the name Adonai even in the first tale, only Elohim. Likewise the linguistic peculiarities attributed to each source are only imaginary....So, too, the differentiation of sources on the basis of the synonyms *שִׁפְחָה* *šiphha* and *אִמָּה* *'ama* ['handmaid'] is purely arbitrary, as I have shown elsewhere. Also the divergence that scholars have sought to find in the moral views expressed in the three stories does not exist in the passages themselves, but only in the imagination of the exegetes....

If we wish to find a satisfactory solution to the problem, our investigations must go deeper than does the superficial and mechanical method of source analysis. In particular, we must pay attention to two things: (a) the aim of the Pentateuchal narratives; (b) the way in which books were customarily composed in the ancient East. It appears that, before the Torah was written, various traditions were current in Israel concerning an episode involving the Matriarchs of the nation. Essentially these traditions were alike, but they differed in particulars: one told of Sarai-Sarah in Egypt; another also spoke of Sarah, but in another place, Gerar; whilst a third referred to Rebekah. Possibly all three flowed from one ancient saga, which assumed variant forms in regard to detail as it was handed down by one generation to another; but this process belongs to the pre-history of the narratives and does not affect our problem.

When the Torah came to be written, the three versions already existed, side by side, among the Israelites. The Torah, whose object was not to investigate the annals of the Patriarchs historically but only to use the existing sagas for the purpose of religious and ethical instruction, was not concerned to examine the question of the relationship of these traditions, and certainly did not apply to them the principles of historical criticism, which were not yet known at that period. Seeing that each of the three tales could serve its aim, and that the triplication of the theme enhanced the usefulness of the stories, Scripture did not refrain from including the three of them.

An interesting illustration of this method is found in Latin literature. Roman tradition used to relate that Publius Decius Mus, one of the two Roman consuls in 340 B.C.E., devoted himself, in the battle between the forces of Rome and those of the Latin-Campanian League fought near Mount Vesuvius, as an oblation to the gods in order to assure the triumph of his army, and that as a reward for the sacrifice of his life the Romans succeeded in prevailing over their foes. A similar tale was also current about his son, who bore the same name as his father and was one of the Roman consuls in 295, to wit, that in the battle between the Romans and the Samnites and their allies near the city of Sentinum, he, too, offered himself as a sacrifice to the deities and thereby brought victory to the Romans. It seems that only the story concerning the son has any historic value, whereas that about his father was only a legend woven round the action of the younger man. But when at the end of the last century B.C.E., the Roman historian Livy (Titus Livius) came to write his great work on Roman history for the glorification of his country and people, and found before him the two traditions, he did not test them in the crucible of criticism; rather, he saw that both of them were useful to his purpose, which was to raise the prestige of the Romans and to emphasize their heroism and devotion to their motherland, and he decided that the duplication was not a disadvantage but that, on the contrary, the twofold display of self-sacrifice in one family could serve as an example, and consequently he did not hesitate to include both tales in his book. Needless to say, this duplication in no way affects the unity of Livy's history. To this work, the theories put forward with regard to the composition of the Pentateuch cannot be applied; the personality of Livy is well known, and the fact that he wrote the history is also established. The unity of authorship and of the work is unchallenged.

Furthermore, even a third legend was created in Rome regarding a third Publius Decius Mus, the grandson of the first, who also offered himself as a votive sacrifice to the gods in the day of battle, like his father and grandfather, for the sake of the victory of his forces; and Cicero bestowed on the three men—father, son and grandson—unstinted praise for the example they set in giving their lives for the good of their people. The threefold account lends still greater glory to the heroic act.

The same is true of the Torah; the thrice-told tale of the deliverance of the Matriarchs greatly magnifies the importance and unfailing character of God's help to his votaries. Hence the three narratives were incorporated in the Torah in the same way as the reiterated accounts of the heroism of the Decii were included in the works of the Roman writers.

The significance of the duplications in the Pentateuch is made clear to us by the explicit evidence of the Torah itself. In the story of the two successive and analogous dreams seen by Pharaoh—the dream of the cows and of the ears of grain—it is related that Joseph, after interpreting the dreams, said to Pharaoh (Gen. xli 32): *And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass.* The same principle applies in our case: by doubling and trebling the assurance, the Torah teaches us that *the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass....*

The third tale enlarges the promise still further. There the help does not come at the last moment, when the danger is near and only by a miracle is it possible to be delivered from it; in this story, Providence guides the course of events in such a way that the peril is averted before it materializes. Thereby the Torah seeks to teach us that the paternal love of the Lord watches over His children so as not only to rescue them from dangers in which they are already involved, but also to forestall the possibility of the dangers that they are liable to bring upon themselves through their fault or default.

But perchance it may be asked: How can we suppose that the three narratives were included in a unitary book, since it is incredible that Abraham and Sarah did not learn the lesson of what befell them in Egypt and committed the same mistake in Gerar, and that their son Isaac was guilty of a like error? But the answer is not difficult: such a question were warranted if the Pentateuchal books were constructed in accordance with the system of logical thinking that the Greeks created for themselves in the fifth century B.C.E., and which the modern world inherited from them; whereas the Torah, like all the works of this epoch, was composed according to the method of organic thinking, which is unlike the Hellenic mode of thought....

Since the use of repetition was a customary feature of the narrative literature of the ancient East, it is not surprising that Biblical narratives also show clear traces of this literary device. It may be added that generally speaking, throughout the entire range of the patriarchal stories in Genesis, the three national ancestors are depicted as parallel figures. We are presented with a picture of a single course of life, duplicated and triplicated both in its general outline and in the detailed events, which is strengthened and confirmed by the threefold narration as a message of good tidings and an assurance regarding Israel's future destiny.

Each of the three patriarchs separated himself, as the Lord's elect, from his relatives who followed a different path (Abraham first left his father's house and then Lot, his brother's son; likewise Isaac parted from Ishmael, and Jacob from Esau); each one received, as the reward for his dedication to the Lord's service, a promise of Divine blessing, of numerous offspring and the possession of the Promised Land; each one took a wife (or wives) from the circle of Mesopotamian relatives; each one waited a long time for children by his wife (or by the wife he loved most), and only after protracted waiting was offspring granted to him by Divine grace; each one was compelled to leave the Promised Land on account of famine; each one found himself in peril in a strange country and was saved by the help of God; each one was subjected to other trials, including grave danger to his favorite son, or separation from him for a long period; each one made a covenant with his neighbors who dwelt in the land; each one acquired an estate in the Promised Land.

There are certain features, however, that are not common to the careers of all three, but to that of two only. Thus, for example, both Abraham and Jacob migrate from Mesopotamia to Canaan and encamp at the same sites; both of them marry handmaids in addition to their wives in order to beget by them children; for both Isaac and Jacob a journey has to be made to Mesopotamia to obtain from there a spouse for them; both Isaac and Jacob bless, intentionally or unintentionally, the younger son or grandchild instead of the first-born; and so on. Sometimes the duplication occurs in the generation of Jacob's children; both the story of the birth of Isaac's twin sons and that of Judah's twin sons contain a reference to an attempt, successful or otherwise, on the part of the younger son to precede his brother into the world. At times an episode recurs in the lifetime of the same patriarch; thus Jacob twice takes a handmaid to wife.

All this clearly shows that repetition is a fundamental and constant element of the patriarchal narratives in Genesis, and no form of source analysis can eradicate this basic characteristic.

Chapter Nine: Educating the Fathers: Father Abraham

Leon R. Kass

The failure of the city and tower of Babel brings to a close Genesis's saga of universal human beginnings. Multiple nations arise as the necessary remedy for the proud and perilous political project of humankind united. After and because of Babel, God abandons His plans to work simultaneously with the entire human race. But He in no way abandons His universal aspirations for human beings. On the contrary, He pursues the same ends but by different means. Having dispersed mankind into many nations, He 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. Accordingly, after the story of Babel, the Bible turns immediately to the effort to establish God's way through the founding of His chosen nation of Israel.

The true political establishment of Israel as a distinctive people must await the liberation from bondage in Egypt and the giving of the Law at Sinai, the major events narrated in Exodus, the second book of the Bible. But Israel has crucial pre-political beginnings that reveal already the core of what the new way will demand: man's free choice for obedience, a concern for justice, and a disposition toward holiness, a way of life guided by awe and reverence before the divine. The remainder of the book of Genesis shows how this orientation is established in the lives and generations of the Israelite patriarchs: Abraham the founder, Isaac the transmitter, and Jacob—later renamed Israel—the progenitor of the 12 tribes that become the incipient nation of Israel.

It is easy to overlook the political and cultural dimensions of the Genesis narrative because the text concentrates on the lives of a few larger-than-life individuals and vividly displays their personal and familial struggles. Indeed, we are drawn to the text in no small measure because of the gigantic personages we meet there. Yet in several ways and for several reasons, the patriarchal tales are pointedly political and cultural, no less than personal and familial. For in telling the stories of the patriarchal generations, the Bible shows them interacting with other nations and other peoples, followers of different gods and practitioners of different ways: the Babylonians, the Arameans, the Canaanites (including the Sodomites, Hittites, Gerarites-Philistines, and Shechemites-Hivites), and (especially) the Egyptians. We must therefore understand that Genesis is here pursuing national or political questions, not just personal ones:

Looking outward, how can this new nation both defend itself against hostile peoples and avoid imitating their unjust or unholy ways? And how can it avoid the opposing evils of defeat and assimilation, of conquest by and rule over other nations, of proud indifference to the outside world and envious imitation of its alien ways?

Looking inward, how can it avoid the disasters to which human relations are prone? And how can it consciously perpetuate into subsequent generations both a spirited concern for righteousness and a humble reverence before God, while avoiding the extremes of stiff-necked pride, on the one hand, and abject abasement, on the other? Finally, how can a whole nation be instructed in God's way? How can such a nation, chosen to be a light unto all the others, survive and flourish? All these matters must be in our minds as we read ahead, watching how the patriarchs struggle with themselves and with the surrounding nations in order to begin and keep alive a new alternative for humankind.

The patriarchal narratives reveal a still deeper connection between the personal-and-familial and the cultural-and-political. Central to the national and political beginnings of the Israelite people is the right ordering of family relations; God's new nation must rest on firm familial ground. This is, to be sure, partly a matter of practical necessity, because the new way needs to be transmitted from one generation to the next. But solid marriages and strong family ties are not merely efficient means for the perpetuation of tradition. They are also substantively at the heart of the new way. Decent, honorable, and reverent family life is itself a central goal of the new national-political teaching.

The point will be even clearer once I correct a false impression that may have resulted from my loose usage of the term "political": The new way, here begun with the patriarchs, is not, strictly speaking, political. That which is truly political concerns the doings and affairs of the city—in Greek, the polis—a settled place, usually having walls that separate insiders from outsiders, dependent upon agriculture and the other arts, and aiming (as we have seen) at self-sufficiency. The beginning tales of Genesis—especially the stories of Cain and of Babel—have already warned us about the dangers of cities and civilization, dangers that are magnified in the case of the universal city but that are present always in any city, large or small, and no matter how many or few of them there might be.

In keeping with its original judgment on cities and civilization, the Bible's new national solution pursued with the Children of Israel will not be, at least for a long time, civic or political in nature.¹ On the contrary, the patriarchs will all be wandering shepherds rather than settled farmers or city dwellers, and this distinction will prove crucial for the difference between the new way and the ways of other peoples especially in matters sexual and familial. Man's proper orientation in the world will be gained—to begin with—not within the proud and strong walls of the city but within the humble and precarious tents of the family. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—all tent dwellers, all finally family men—will have encounters with cities and their kings, but they will not live or rule after these more prevalent fashions. Once suitably instructed, they will live and govern "familially," not politically. It is not much of an exaggeration to suggest that the primary—not the last but the first—innovation of the Israelite new way is nothing other than patriarchy itself.

This point can be easily misunderstood, as indeed it often has been, especially in modern times. "Patriarchy" has become a dirty word, and the thing to which it is thought to refer—the hegemonic and arbitrary rule of men over women and children, justified simply because they are men—is roundly condemned. Moreover, biblical religion gets much of the blame for this allegedly unjust institution—not without some cause. As we will soon see, the biblical way does indeed begin with patriarchy, and the founding fathers of Israel are indeed patriarchs. But whether blame or credit is more appropriate depends on whether or not the institution of patriarchy is in fact unjust and

¹ True enough, God will eventually have His own city, Jerusalem, and Israel will have its own king. But these are latter-day additions to what is essential, and even then, they are in part concessions to human weakness. Though ancient Israel was intended to be, and indeed became, a nation with its own land, laws, and self-government, forced to engage in war and other international affairs, the suspicion of cities and politics never disappears; and the character of Israelite communal life is decisively informed by the more-than-political purposes to which the less-than-political institutions of marriage and family point—that is, when they are rightly understood and suitably constituted. The threat that politics poses to righteousness and holiness becomes a key theme of the prophetic books of the Bible: the failure of political Israel to follow the ways of the Lord.

unwise, a question too important to be decided on the basis of mere prejudice. Before we can judge soundly in this matter, we must first try to understand the biblical meaning of patriarchy, and to recognize the more dangerous sociopolitical alternatives to which Israelite patriarchy appears as a fitting answer. The rest of this book, which, like the rest of Genesis, is concerned with the Hebrew patriarchs, will attempt to shed light on these questions.

“Patriarch” and “patriarchy” are neither Hebrew biblical nor biblical Hebrew terms—though the Hebrew Bible speaks often about “our fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” through whom Israel has its special relationship to God.² “Patriarch” is Greek in origin: *patriarchas*, “progenitor” or “father or chief of a race,” is compounded out of two basic roots, *patria*, “family” or “clan” (derived from *pater*, “father”), and *arches*, “ruler” (derived from *archein*, “to be first”).³ Using this (or any other) foreign term when approaching our text does expose us to the risk of possible distortion, of not understanding the Bible as it wants to be understood. Nevertheless, its usage will prove illuminating, especially because the idea of patriarchy, by combining matters of both family and rule, is singularly well suited to describe the family-based solution to the problem of politics that is the foundation of the new Israelite way. Crucial for our understanding will be the effort to learn what the Bible means by “father,” “fathering” and “fatherhood,” and what it means by fatherly “rule,” “ruling” and “rulership.” As we shall see, it is one thing to beget a child (or to be pre-eminent in the household), quite another to do so understanding what it means and entails. To state the conclusion in advance: Patriarchy properly understood turns out to be the cure for patriarchy properly condemned. The biblical sort of patriarchy is meant to provide the remedy for arbitrary and unjust male dominance and self-aggrandizement, for the mistreatment of women, and for the neglect of children.

The rule of the fathers is, by itself, only part of the remedy. A special understanding of marriage is also required. Indeed, the special kind of patriarchy instituted in Genesis is distinguished by the special regard it comes to have for marriage and for women as wives and (especially) mothers. Though they are, on balance, less prominent in the stories than their husbands, the matriarchs—Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel, strong women all—come to play critical roles in the establishment of the new way, shaping crucial events and even directing their patriarchal “rulers” to pursue courses of action without which the new way would not survive. Patriarchy rightly understood thus depends on marriage rightly understood. Proper marriage no less than proper patriarchy is an essential element in promoting justice and holiness.

Proper marriage and proper patriarchy are hardly the natural ways of humankind. They have to be learned—to begin with, somewhat against the grain. Both require fidelity, not only to spouses and children, but also to the higher moral and spiritual possibilities to which human beings are called. Neither marriage nor fatherhood, neither family nor nation, can become truly what they are and should be unless they are steadily oriented toward and faithfully dedicated to something higher than themselves.

² When God first calls Moses out of the burning bush, He identifies Himself as “the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Exodus 3:6). See also Exodus 3:15-t6.

³ The word *patriarches* occurs four times in the New Testament, which was written in Greek: once in Acts 2:29, referring to David; once in Hebrews 7:4, referring to Abraham; and twice more (in the plural) in Acts 7:8-9, referring to the 12 sons of Jacob. In Jewish tradition, neither the sons of Jacob nor King David are spoken of as, or counted among, “the fathers.”

As we shall see, the patriarchal narratives are all about how the founders of the new way acquire and transmit this elevated orientation and dedication.

Educating Father Abraham: A Sensible Approach

The new way begins with Father Abraham. His story occupies more than a quarter of the book of Genesis, from the report of his birth (chapter 11) to the report of his death, at age 175 (chapter 25). Nearly all of the account concentrates on the portion of his life between the call to leave his father's house, at age 75, and the task of obtaining a wife for his son Isaac, 65 years later. During these years, Abraham undergoes numerous adventures, at home and abroad, with man and with God. By means of these adventures, Abraham gradually comes to know what is required of him as father and founder of the new way.

It is not exactly traditional to speak about the education of Abraham. Pious tales of the patriarch regard him as a precocious monotheist even before God calls him, a man who smashed his father's idols, a man who sprang forth fully obedient and knowledgeable about the ways of the Lord. But a careful reading of the biblical text shows otherwise: Abraham indeed goes to school, God Himself is his major teacher, and Abraham's adventures constitute his education, right up to his final exam, the binding of Isaac.

To appreciate God's education of Abraham, it is necessary to keep in mind the pre-Abrahamic, which is to say the natural and uninstructed, human condition and to see just what needs educating and why. The necessary background is in fact presented in the opening 11 chapters of Genesis. These primordial stories have shown us why it will be extremely difficult to establish a better way of life for human beings. For they have exposed the perennial problems in human relations and laid bare their deep psychic roots. From these stories we have learned especially about the dangers of human freedom and rationality, about the injustices that follow from excessive self-love and vanity, and about the evils born of human pride and the aspiration to full self-sufficiency. Those first 11 chapters have demonstrated the troubles within the household—between man and woman, between brothers, between parents and children—and the ever-present risks of patricide, fratricide, and misogyny. They have demonstrated the troubles with outsiders, including both animals and other, unrelated human beings, and the risks of violent conflict and injustice. And they have demonstrated the troubles in the relation between man and God.

By the time the careful reader has finished the first 11 chapters of Genesis, he is well-nigh convinced that mankind, left to its own devices, is doomed to failure, destruction, and misery. He hopes that there might be an alternative, a way of life different from the natural or uninstructed ways of men, a successful way in which mankind might flourish. According to the text, God more than shares the reader's dismay as well as the reader's hopes, and He decides to take a more direct role in the matter, beginning with Abraham. God Himself, as it were, will take Abraham by the hand, will serve as his tutor, and will educate him to be a new human being, one who will stand in right relation to his household, to other peoples, and to God—one who will set an example for countless generations, who, inspired by his story, will cleave to these righteous ways. Because of the moral education available to us through the first 11 chapters, when God calls Abraham we readers are also eager to listen.

But how should we listen? In particular, in what order and manner can we most profitably consider the account? Abraham's experiences are varied and complex, and what he learns through them is progressive, multifaceted, and not easily articulated. It is therefore difficult to know how

best to present them. No doubt the order in which they occur is crucial; what a man can learn second or fourth usually depends on what he has learned first or third. Besides, as we shall see, the text recounts only certain selected episodes in Abraham's life and strings them together in a tight and carefully crafted order that best serves the Bible's overall moral-political and pedagogical purposes. The best way to proceed, therefore, would seem to be chronological, commenting chapter by chapter on Abraham's unfolding life story and paying careful attention to what prepares what and to what follows what, and why—to the inner logic of the account.

But such an approach, though truest both to life as lived and to the text as written, taxes the understanding. The mind looks for coherent threads and themes that can make experience intelligible and that can render articulate what experience teaches. A thematic approach, grouping together episodes on similar subjects (for example, on the promised land, or fatherhood, or relations with other nations or with God), might be more illuminating, despite its risk of taking episodes out of their narrative contexts or of distorting multidimensional stories by focusing only on one selected aspect. In this way, it will be easier to see, for example, how the education of Abraham explicitly addresses the perennial troubles of human life.

What follows is therefore something of a compromise, reasonably faithful to the chronological narrative, but also grouping together some widely separated stories in order to show just how Abraham gains education in one crucial matter or another—in the next chapter, regarding the meaning of marriage; in Chapter 11, regarding the meaning of patriarchy. But before detailing the patriarch's adventures, a question must be asked:

Who is Abraham?

To know Abraham and his aspirations and ambitions, we must begin with his father, Terah, a member of the ninth generation after Noah, a descendant of Shem, Noah's most pious son.

And Terah lived 70 years and begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Now these are the generations of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran begot Lot. And Haran died in the presence of his father, Terah, in the land of his nativity, in Ur of the Chaldees. (11:26-28)

Terah is himself quite late to fatherhood; whereas his progenitors in the preceding seven generations begot their firstborn son when they were no older than 35 (35, 30, 34, 30, 32, 30, 29), Terah is a grandfatherly 70 years old when Abram, the first of his three sons, is born.⁴ He witnesses

⁴ A comparison of the account of Terah with that of his eight ancestors in the line of Shem (see 11:10-25) reveals several subtle differences in addition to his late age of first paternity. First, in all previous generations, only the name of the firstborn son is given; here, where we have come to expect the formula "X lived Y years and he begot Z," we get "T lived Y years and he begot A, N, and H." All three sons are mentioned together. Although the text will focus almost exclusively on Abraham, this genealogical peculiarity alerts us to the possible importance of Terah's other two sons and their descendants to the future generations of Abraham. It will turn out that the wives of Abraham's son Isaac and of his grandson Jacob will come from the line descended from a union between Nahor and the daughter of his brother Haran. Second, regarding all previous generations the text reports that the named ancestor, after begetting his named firstborn son, "lived Q years and he begot sons and daughters" (none of them named). In contrast, no mention is made of Terah's fathering any daughters, an omission whose significance we will discover only much later (see Chapter 10). I owe these observations to a superb paper, "Terah's Seed: Between Incest and Exogamy," written for my 2000-2001 Genesis seminar by Rachel Airmet, a graduate student in the Committee on Social Thought.

the death of his youngest son, Haran, father of Lot, and sometime afterwards leaves his city and his homeland, Ur of the Chaldees (otherwise known as Babylonia), and heads for Canaan. When he goes he takes with him “Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his son’s son, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, the wife of Abram his son” (11:31).⁵

Why Terah leaves we are not told, but even before Abram is called to Canaan, his father is, quite on his own, drawn toward what would become the Promised Land. Terah is drawn away from the Tigris-Euphrates valley, away from the land famous for the worship of heaven, the land where man first learned to measure the motions of the heavenly bodies (astronomy) in the hope of learning how to predict and control terrestrial events (through astrology). But though he was something of a radical—perhaps even sensing that there was something wrong with heaven worship—Terah did not complete his journey, but settled instead in Haran, a city, we learn from non-biblical sources, that was, like Ur, a center of moon worship.

Abram belongs to the tenth generation after Noah, the last generation that could have known this “second Adam”: according to biblical chronology, readily calculable from the genealogies given in the text, Abram is born in 1948, Noah dies in 2006. Noah, in contrast, was the first man who could not have known Adam. These biographical facts have symbolic moral-political meaning. Whereas Noah, the new man, represents a clean break with the man from the Garden of Eden, Abram will build on the foundation begun with Noah.

As Terah’s firstborn, Abram is given a proud name that perhaps means “lofty or exalted [*ram*] father [*av*]” or “the father is exalted.”⁶ Abram seems not to be bothered by the advanced age or restlessness of his father. On the contrary, he goes with Terah on his wanderings toward Canaan, whereas his brother Nahor stays behind:⁷ Abram shows filial duty and/or shares his father’s reason to leave. When he goes, he goes a married man:

And took Abram and Nahor to themselves wives, and the name of Abram’s wife was Sarai [princess]⁸ and the name of Nahor’s wife was Milcah [queen], the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and the father of Iscah. And Sarai was barren; she had no child. (11:29-30)

⁵ Terah apparently does not take with him his wife or wives. In contrast to what we are told about Abram and Nahor, we do not learn the name(s) of Terah’s spouse(s). Presumably they were Chaldean women from the city of Ur who belong to and remain with their Mesopotamian society. (My thanks again to Rachel Airmet.)

⁶ Some 19th-century biblical scholars, reading the text symbolically, regarded the patriarchs as symbols of natural powers, and they saw Abram in particular as the representative of the lofty heavens, the sky father, especially the sky at night. This view is surely far-fetched as an interpretation of the biblical character. But it may shed light on the meaning of the name he received from his father—“Lofty Father”—a name that would fit with the heaven- (moon-) worshiping ways of ancient Babylonia. It would also make more radical and significant the difference between his original name, Abram, and the name God gives him when the covenant between them is established, Abraham, “father of multitudes.” The shift is from looking up to unchanging nature to looking ahead to procreation and perpetuation.

⁷ At least for now. Later we will meet Nahor’s descendants-Rebekah and Laban, and then Laban’s daughters, Leah and Rachel—living in Haran (Paddan-aram), the city to which Terah now moves.

⁸ Though in Hebrew Sarai means “princess,” in Akkadian it means “queen,” and appears to be related to Sharratu, the name of the female consort to the moon god, the principal god of Ur.

The wives were “taken” by the brothers, yet the fact that they are named indicates their likely importance for the sequel.⁹ But whereas we are told (with emphasis) that Nahor took his orphaned niece, Milcah, we are given not a word as to the parentage of Sarai (a silence worth remembering for the discussion of marriage in Chapter 10). Instead of hearing of her origins, we learn here only that she is childless; soon, we shall learn that she is also very beautiful.

So who is Abram? He is (before we meet him) a childless, rootless, homeland-less, perhaps godless, devoted firstborn son of an old wanderer and radical, a man who has grown out of, but who may have outgrown, the Babylonian ways and gods. He is very far from the self-satisfied and secure condition of the builders of Babel whose story immediately precedes his own. We surmise that Abram may long for roots, land, home, settled ways, children, and something great, perhaps even for the divine. About the divine, we wonder whether he might even have intuited a thing or two as a result of his experience in Ur: on his own or perhaps following his father, he may have seen through the worship of heaven. As we suggested in the last chapter, he may have figured out that there must be a single, invisible, and intelligent source behind the many silent and dumb heavenly bodies, that the truth is not one city with many gods, but many cities in search of the one God.

Closer to home, Abram stays long married to a childless but beautiful woman of lineage unknown to the reader; he is still with her at age 75, when God first calls him. Hillel Fradkin argues from this fact that Abram’s childlessness is not altogether involuntary: he abstains from sowing seed with another wife because of his faithful love of Sarai, a love perhaps connected with her great beauty. Like many men, Abram’s love of a beautiful woman exceeds his desire for children, at least at the start. In this erotic love Fradkin perceptively sees a basis for Abram’s educability, for eros generally directs the soul to something higher than oneself. Abraham’s longings are surely part of what makes him educable, but it remains to be seen whether the beautiful Sarai is the chief object of his aspiration or whether Sarai’s beauty is the womanly asset of greatest importance from God’s point of view.

Of Abram’s initial character we know little, beyond these frankly speculative suggestions. The first real clue to what might truly move his soul comes only when he receives the call from God. The Lord addresses Abram in a two-part speech, first with a demanding command, then with a sevenfold promise:

Now the Lord said unto Abram:

“Go thee forth [*Jekh lekha*: literally, go for thyself] from thy land, and from thy kindred [or birthplace: *moledet*], and from thy father’s house, unto the land that I will show thee.

And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee,

and I will make thy name great [*va’agadlah shemekha*], and be thou a blessing.

⁹ Sarai and Milcah are the first women whose names we know since Adah, Zilpah, and Naamah, the wives and daughter of the long since forgotten Lamech, heroic descendant of Cain (4:19-24). Sarai will give birth to Isaac, fathered by Abraham; Milcah will give birth to Bethuel, fathered by Nahor, who in turn will be the father of Rebekah. The marriage of Isaac and Rebekah will reunite these two lines. Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebekah, will marry two daughters of Rebekah’s brother Laban. These two women and all three sons of Terah are direct progenitors of the line of the patriarchs. When, eventually, we learn of Sarai’s parentage, we will see how “the patriarchal family line is a self-contained unit, originating solely in Terah, with no pathways to or from the outer world” (Rachel Airmet, “Terah’s Seed”).

And I will bless those [plural] that bless thee, and harm him [singular] that curses thee, and in thee all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (12:1-3)

Abram is commanded to abandon all that is familiar—his land, his kinsmen, and his father’s house—and to go to a strange land that God will show him. In addition, as if to make up for what he shall lose, Abram is promised that he will become the founder of a great (that is, numerous and/or mighty and/or important) nation and that he will be prosperous, famous, and a standard by which a blessing is invoked. Beyond these personal benefits, others too will gain: those who wish him well will prosper (whereas he who mistreats him will suffer) and—most impressive—all the world’s peoples shall flourish on his account. Addressing him out of the blue, without precedent or prior warning, God does not merely command Abram. He also appeals directly to Abram’s situation and to Abram’s likely longings and ambitions—the love of fame and glory, the love of gain, the aspiration to be a founder of a great nation.

God knew His customer: Abram, obeying the command, goes immediately, without hesitating and without so much as a tiny question: “So Abram went, as the Lord had spoken unto him” (12:4). In apparent obedience,¹⁰ he continues the journey his father had begun on his own. But why he goes is not made clear. Does he go because he is a god-hungry man who is moved by the awe-inspiring, commanding voice? Or does he go because he is a greatly ambitious man who is enticed by the promises of founding a great nation, prosperity, and great fame among all humankind? One cannot be sure.

For a number of reasons, the second, more worldly explanation makes a great deal of sense. To establish a great and godly nation in the midst of a hostile world, God will need to tap a bold and ambitious man with political aspirations and ambitions. The meek might someday inherit the earth, but in a world dominated by the anything-but-meek, they will have great trouble establishing a secure community based on this teaching. Also, because God can neither extirpate pride from the human soul nor eliminate man’s desire for greatness and fame—recall the Babel builders’ unanimous wish to “make us a name”—it makes excellent sense that He should enlist man’s ambition and pride in His project to subdue them.¹¹ Man’s pride can be exploited in the effort to subordinate it in service to righteousness and holiness.

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. For what kind of

¹⁰ I say apparent obedience for this reason: verse 12:4 continues, “and Lot went with him.” Abram does not leave behind everything from his father’s house. The consequences of Lot’s presence we shall consider in the next two chapters.

¹¹ Abram, already bearing a name betokening loftiness, may well desire fame and glory. But as God’s promise implies, Abram will not be able to make his name great all by himself. Rather, God will enlarge—He does not use the verb *‘asah*, “to make”—Abram’s name (as He does, quite literally, when He renames him in chapter 17). As we shall see, Abraham gains his great name for being the (admittedly virtuous) bearer of God’s covenant and founder of His new way.

being is it that speaks but is not seen and—more wondrous and more to the point—can see into my invisible soul, to know precisely what it is that I, Abram, most crave? Let's take a walk with this awesome voice and see what it can do.

Though I am partial to this interpretation, on both political and psychological grounds, we must remember that the text is absolutely (and happily) silent regarding Abram's motives for answering God's call. For now, the most important fact is that he indeed answers it—immediately, unhesitatingly, and (almost) to the letter. But the question about what is uppermost in Abram's soul is not trivial. On the contrary, it is the question of questions for the character of the new way: what will be the ultimate object of human aspiration and devotion? In his final test—that is, in the story of the binding of Isaac—Abraham will be compelled to declare whether he reveres the Commander more than he loves His promised gifts. But here at the beginning, we are in the dark about what answer Abram would give, if pressed to choose.

The text's (indirectly conveyed but I think deliberate) ambiguity regarding Abram's initial motive—obedience or ambition, awe-reverence or pride—serves a useful pedagogical purpose for the readers. It provokes our curiosity and encourages us to consider as we read ahead just what sort of experiences or evidence might lead Abram—or for that matter, anyone else—to finally put God first. Were absolute submission required of him (or us) at the outset, few of us could even imagine taking a walk with Abram. But insofar as we too are ambitious for greatness and prosperity or desirous of fame, we can vicariously participate in his journey, and although none of us is Abraham's equal, we can learn from his inspiring example. Indeed, even if, though lacking great ambition ourselves, we have only a taste for greatness in others, cheering for Abram on his bold journey can bring us, as it brought him, to undreamed-of understanding.

These suggestions about Abram's ambitions are, therefore, not meant to disparage his achievement in answering the call. Far from it. You and I would probably ignore a voice that spoke to us in these terms. But not Abram. It is less that he has nothing to lose; in fact, he loses a great deal: his remaining attachments to land and family. And it is not only that he has much to gain; not everyone who lacks and wants land, seed, and substance would answer such a call. It is rather that, as a great-hearted man, Abram has large, even political, aspirations and, more important, the courage to sacrifice present security and to risk everything to realize his dreams—to be sure, also opening himself to the possibility of receiving God's providence. True, next to the statesmanly Moses, Abram will appear to be rather mild and contemplative; Moses the liberator and lawgiver is from the start more obviously political. But seen in his own terms, Abram is no less a political man; we have it, albeit indirectly, on God's own authority: just look at how God chooses to catch this fellow. (Later, we will learn too of Abram's remarkable military prowess, as he drives back the invading forces in the war of the kings.) Abram has the right stuff for founding.

Many a man has a desire to found and to rule, many a man longs for a great name, especially one that could outlast his own extinction in death. These problematic aspirations, whose dangers have been displayed in earlier stories in Genesis, God will exploit and then educate in the founding of His new way. As we shall see, central to this education is an education about proper fatherhood and, therefore, about the indispensable role of women in the success of any great nation—even more in a nation whose greatness is to be grounded in justice and whose institutions are to aspire to holiness.

The Shape of Abraham's Journey

Abraham's education is obtained by undergoing 11 trials, from his original call through the binding

of Isaac (see schematic summary in the table on Pages 47-48). During this time he also has 10 encounters with the divine, all of them initiated by God; after God calls Abraham, His subsequent interactions with him may be understood as responses either to Abraham's successes in his trials or to their consequences.¹²

In Abraham's first trial, already discussed, the Lord—out of the blue—calls him with a command sweetened by a seven-fold promise of great blessing: Abraham is commanded to go forth from his home in Haran and to go to Canaan, and he is promised fame, prosperity, and the founding of a great nation. Abraham immediately obliges. When he arrives in Canaan to find the land occupied by the Canaanites, and is therefore very likely perplexed about his prospects to become a great nation, the Lord appears to him (encounter 2) and promises to give this now-occupied land to Abraham's seed.

Second, when famine strikes, Abraham (on his own) goes down to Egypt, where his wife, Sarah, is imperiled in Pharaoh's palace. The Lord, without notifying Abraham, intervenes to rescue Sarah by sending plagues on Pharaoh's household. As a result, Abraham emerges from Egypt a wealthy man; he returns to Beth-El, the place of an altar he had built before going to Egypt, and calls on the name of the Lord. But his newly acquired wealth soon produces dangerous tension with his nephew, Lot, who had accompanied Abraham first to Canaan and then to Egypt and back, and who also has become a prosperous herdsman. This third trial is resolved when, on Abraham's initiative, the two men amicably agree to separate; when Abraham gives him first choice of territory, Lot heads for the prosperous cities of the plain, Sodom and Gomorrah. In response to Abraham's magnanimous act and his voluntary separation from his only possible heir, the Lord (encounter 3) now augments the previous promise. He tells Abraham that he will eventually have all the land visible in the region, including what he had just ceded to Lot, and He promises him seed as numerous as the grains of dust on the earth.

But Lot is soon captured in a war that pits the invading Babylonian kings against the local Canaanite kings and their minions. Facing his fourth trial, Abraham, who had prudently wanted to remain neutral in the war, enters the fighting to rescue his kinsman and wins a great victory, thus establishing himself as a political-military force to be reckoned with. Yet Abraham, swearing an oath by the Lord, refuses the victor's usual spoils of war. When this foray into international strife and his brush with death make Abraham anxious, the word of the Lord comes to him in a vision (encounter 4) to calm his fears, promising him His protection as well as great rewards. But with Lot returned to Sodom, Abraham remains doubtful of God's promise because he lacks an heir. When, in his first expression of a desire for children, he presses God on the matter of progeny, the Lord tells him for the first time that his heir will be a son from his own loins, and using a loftier image than before, He promises him that his seed will be as numerous as the stars of the heavens. When Abraham, impatient, demands a sign, God commands Abraham to divide some animals and enacts the "covenant between the sacrificial pieces," informing Abraham that not he but only his remote descendants will inherit the land, long after his death and only after they will have been slaves for four hundred years in a strange land. Thanks to these exchanges, which focus Abraham's mind more

¹² The summary that follows is influenced by the structural analysis provided by U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part Two: From Noah to Abraham* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1964), 294-97. However, I depart from Cassuto's analysis in some important respects, and the generalizations I offer about the inner logic of the sequence are my own. In this overview of his adventures, for simplicity's sake, I will call the patriarch Abraham throughout, even though, as I will note, he acquires this new name only in the middle.

than ever before on his wish for his own progeny, Abraham accepts Sarah's offer to father a child by her handmaid, Hagar the Egyptian. But before Ishmael, his firstborn, can be born, Abraham nearly loses his heir due to family strife—his fifth trial—as the pregnant Hagar flees from Sarah's harshness (a response to Hagar's contempt for her barren mistress). Again not notifying Abraham (as in the episode of Sarah with Pharaoh), the Lord intervenes (through a messenger) to avert the danger: He gets Hagar to return to Sarah, Ishmael is born and Abraham comes to regard Ishmael as his heir.

Here, precisely at the midpoint of the story, with Ishmael now on the cusp of manhood, God appears to Abraham (encounter 5) and reveals what He wants of him. In this decisive episode, God charges Abraham to “walk before Me and be wholehearted,” and He then offers to enter into a binding and eternal covenant with Abraham and his seed. The previous divine promise is greatly augmented: Abraham will become the father of many nations and the progenitor of kings; the land will be given to his seed as an everlasting possession; and the Lord will be his and their God, always. Abraham has his name changed from Abram, “lofty father,” to Abraham, “father of many.” And he is told, for the first time, that his beloved but barren Sarah, age 89, will bear him a son, Isaac, his true heir, through whom God will perpetuate the (just announced) everlasting covenant. All that the new covenant requires of Abraham is that he execute the command to circumcise himself and all the members of his household—his sixth and central trial. Abraham complies without delay.

After he performs the crucial act of circumcision, thus accepting the covenant as founder of God's chosen people, the Lord again appears to him (encounter 6), this time through the medium of three traveling strangers. These men test Abraham's capacity for hospitality (his seventh trial); they seek to discover whether his entrance into a preferred relationship with God has corrupted his willingness to behave justly toward outsiders. When Abraham performs splendidly (in sharp contrast to Lot, to whom the same strangers next come), the visitors—now revealed to be divine messengers—confirm the promise of a son by Sarah. Next, explicitly in order to show Abraham what he must teach his son and his descendants, and taking advantage of Abraham's concern for Lot, now again in trouble (this time in Sodom), God Himself provokes a remarkable and unique conversation about justice and punishment for the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (encounter 7). Through this (often misinterpreted) conversation (trial 8), Abraham, after arguing against the destruction of the guiltless, comes to discover and accept some harsh truths about political justice and gives up the dispute. Having gained Abraham's tacit agreement to His plan, God proceeds to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, but He rescues Lot for Abraham's sake.

Chastened by the display of God's wrathful power, Abraham wanders off into the land of the Philistines and allows Sarah to be taken by Abimelech, king of Gerar (trial 9). Once again, God intervenes (unbeknownst to Abraham) to rescue Sarah, this time through a dream sent to Abimelech, who in turn compels Abraham to acknowledge his wrongdoing regarding his wife. Only now is Isaac born in peace, when Abraham is 100 years old. In his tenth trial, Abraham, under pressure from Sarah (who wants to defend Isaac from Ishmael's misconduct), and with God's instruction to heed Sarah's wishes (encounter 8), is compelled to banish Ishmael, his firstborn son. And when Abraham obeys, God intervenes to rescue Ishmael and promises to make also of him a great nation. His household now well ordered, Abraham enters into a covenant with his friend Abimelech and builds a sanctuary to proclaim God's name.

But just when everything looks set—in his family, with his neighbors, and with God—the Lord asks Abraham (encounter 9) to sacrifice his beloved Isaac, the son who—according to God's own promise—is to be the bearer of the lasting covenant. After Abraham, so to speak, passes this final test,

binding Isaac on the altar, the Lord, through His messenger (the tenth and final encounter), halts the sacrifice and delivers the fullest version of the divine promise. Echoing and enlarging upon the promise the Lord made when He first called Abraham, the messenger blesses him with promises of seed as numerous as both the stars of heaven and the sand upon the seashore: seed that shall have victory over their enemies, and seed that shall be a blessing to all the nations of the earth. Abraham, who was willing to renounce the promise out of reverence for the Promiser, regains—now on account of his demonstrated merit—both his son and the blessings of great-nationhood that he was so willing to surrender. Abraham’s education now complete, God does not speak with him again. Hereafter, the text recounts Abraham’s final deeds, preparing the way for the next generation: buying a burial place for Sarah; finding a wife for Isaac; and entering a (puzzling) second marriage, having much issue.

The adventures of Abraham are schematized for easy review in the following table [see next page]. The 11 trials are listed chronologically in the first column (the specific actions of Abraham are italicized). His 10 encounters with the divine—all but one of them involving God’s commands and/or promises—are listed in the second column (set chronologically in responsive relation to the trials of column one). The third column lists (in their appropriate places in relation to the trials of Abraham) five deeds performed by the Lord without Abraham’s knowledge. From even a cursory examination of the schema of Abraham’s adventures, a number of interesting observations emerge.

First, we note the thoroughgoing chiasmic structure of the adventures, concentrically arranged in pairs around the central trial of circumcision. In the central (sixth) episode of his life, Abraham accepts both God’s charge to “walk before Me and be wholehearted” and His covenant with Abraham and his seed, the covenant with what will become God’s chosen people. Both the first and the last adventures are deeds complying with commands to “go” to places (Canaan, Moriah) that the Lord will designate; but the first is a response to both a command and a promise, whereas the last is a response only to a command that makes clear which it is—obedience to command, or love of promised reward—that is first in Abraham’s soul. Trials 2 and 3 are paralleled by trials 9 and 10: Sarah, posing as Abraham’s sister, is twice in trouble in the hands of foreign potentates (trials 2 and 9); and trouble brewing with Abraham’s potential but improper heirs, Lot and Ishmael, is twice resolved by their departure (trials 3 and 10). In trials 4 and 8, Lot and Sodom are in danger, and Abraham intervenes to help; in the first case, he succeeds in rescuing them through warfare; in the second, because the threat comes not from man but from God, he fails to save the city (though God elects to save Lot for Abraham’s sake). Whereas in the first case, Abraham enters political life as his brother’s keeper, to save one of his own, in the second he acquiesces in a decision to destroy Sodom that could destroy his kinsman and accepts the necessity of harsh political justice and its claims over against the love of one’s own. Finally, the trials immediately surrounding the covenant of circumcision concern questions of kin and stranger: in the fifth, Hagar, the stranger host-mother bearing Abraham’s child, is harshly treated by Sarah but is solicitously cared for by God; in the seventh, the stranger guests receive outstanding hospitality from host Abraham (and Sarah).

Second, we notice (in the second column) that God directly both commands Abraham (five times) and offers him promises (seven times). The promises are more prominent near the beginning, the commands are more prominent toward the end; the carrots come before the stick. Moreover, the commands increase in their difficulty: from leaving home, to bringing animals for a sacrifice, to circumcision, to banishing the firstborn, to killing your covenant-bearing and favored son as a sacrifice—an act that means the willing destruction of everything God had promised. We suspect that what Abraham learns from his earlier trials prepares him to meet the ever more difficult demands of God’s subsequent commands.

Abraham's Trials	Divine Encounters	Other Divine Deeds (not known to Abraham)
	1. COMMAND ("Go') and PROMISE	
1. Called with a COMMAND and a PROMISE, <i>Abraham answers the call</i>		
	2. Promise of Land	
2. Sarah in trouble in Egypt		
		1. Sends plagues to Pharaoh; rescues Sarah
3. Trouble with Lot; Abraham parts with Lot		
	3. Increased PROMISE Of land/seed	
4. Lot in trouble; <i>Abraham (his brother's keeper) wins victory for the king of Sodom and rescues Lot, who returns to Sodom</i>		
	4. Increased PROMISE of seed; COMMAND and covenant	
5. Hagar, the stranger woman, as host mother; trouble with Sarah		
		2. Appeals to Hagar; returns her to Sarah (Ishmael born)
	5. Charge and covenant: increased PROMISE and COMMAND ("Circumcise")	
6. <i>Enacts the covenant of circumcision</i>		
	6. God appears as strangers at tent	
7. <i>Serves as hospitable host to strangers</i>		
	7. PROMISE (son to Sarah); instruction re political justice	
8. Lot (and all of Sodom) in trouble; <i>Abraham argues the justice of destroying Sodom but eventually accepts it</i>		

		3. Destroys Sodom; rescues Lot
9. Sarah in trouble in Gerar		
		4. Sends dream to Abimelech; rescues Sarah; remembers Sarah (Isaac born)
	8. COMMAND (“Banish Ishmael”)	
10. Trouble with Ishmael; <i>Abraham parts with Ishmael</i>		
		5. Calls to Hagar; rescues Ishmael
	9. COMMAND (“Sacrifice Isaac”)	
11. <i>Abraham binds Isaac</i> : puts obedience to God’s <i>COMMAND</i> above <i>PROMISED</i> rewards		
	10. Increased PROMISE	

Third, nearly all the trials (after the call) directly or indirectly concern marriage and fatherhood, and especially the matter of the suitable heir, to be born of the proper mother. Trials 3, 4, and 8 concern Lot, Abraham’s nephew and, to begin with, his most plausible heir (in the face of his wife’s barrenness); trials 2, 5, and 9 concern the women, Sarah and Hagar, in their sexual and childbearing capacity; and trials 3, 5, 10 and 11 involve the actual or potential loss of possible heirs (Lot, Ishmael [twice], and Isaac). The central sixth episode involves circumcision of father and son, establishing as a pattern for all future generations this sign of the covenant, marked in the flesh of the organ of generation. The only trial that is not at all about generation and progeny—number 7, offering hospitality to the strangers—reveals that Abraham has a well-ordered house, and the properly welcomed visitors reciprocate their host’s hospitality by announcing the birth of Isaac, his true heir.

Fourth, these plainly familial episodes are, at the same time, also highly political, most obviously the war of the kings (trial 4) and the conversation about the justice of destroying Sodom and Gomorrah (trial 8). In trials 2 and 9, Abraham learns the ways of Egypt and Gerar (especially in the matter of women). Trials 3, 4, and especially 8 involve him in dealings with and about the licentious Sodomites and other Canaanite peoples. The Egyptian origin of Hagar figures prominently in the familial troubles of episodes 5 and 10. The importance of national distinctiveness and the correlative danger of xenophobia are the themes, respectively, of the neighboring trials of circumcision and hospitality (6 and 7). All these encounters with other nations probe the dangers of destruction and assimilation, while at the same time providing Abraham with experience in negative cultural alternatives against which the new way must come to stand.

Fifth, the trials of Abraham are, of course, also and ultimately about man’s relation to God. Issues of obedience, trust, and faith run through the entire set of adventures. Not only through God’s explicit commands, but also through seeing the fittingness of His responses to Abraham’s deeds does Abraham come increasingly to know who it was that called him and what it is that He wants from him.

Sixth, the overlapping and interweaving of the familial, the political, and the religious aspects of the adventures of Abraham are central to the meaning of the education he is meant to receive. A full understanding of what Abraham learns about his mission as founder of the new way will therefore require integrating the implicit teachings about marriage and family, justice and politics, and standing rightly and humbly before God.

Finally, we notice (column three) that God undertakes a number of interventions about which Abraham apparently knows nothing. Most of these are rescue operations involving foreign nations or individuals, and all of them are connected to sexuality and generation: God (twice) rescues Sarah from princely harems; God rescues Lot when He destroys the sexually corrupt city of Sodom; and God compassionately (twice) addresses Hagar, the Egyptian concubine, and rescues her son, Ishmael. In the latter cases, we are told that God acts for Abraham's sake: it is for Abraham's merit that God saves Lot, it is because Ishmael is Abraham's son that God guarantees his safety and his future. But no such reasons are given for God's interventions to save Sarah. Indeed, in both these cases it is at least partly Abraham's fault that Sarah is in danger. It is Abraham who passes her off as his sister, first in Egypt with Pharaoh, then in Gerar with Abimelech. Abraham does nothing to solve the problem he thus creates; God must on both occasions intervene, in Egypt with plagues, in Gerar with threatening dreams. Abraham also does nothing to solve the conflict between Sarah and Hagar, a difficulty caused by Abraham's agreeing to sire a child through Hagar (once again denying Sarah's wifeliness). Indeed, the schema shows at a glance that there are exactly three trials confronting Abraham that God alone solves, and solves without Abraham's participation or knowledge: the three trials involving woman or wife (2, 5, and 9, corrected by the divine deeds 1, 2, and 4 in column three). From this evidence we come to suspect that Abraham was not only incapable of solving the difficulties involving his wife; he was probably—to begin with—unaware that he had done something wrong in bringing them about. Whatever his beginning virtues, Abraham seems, to say the least, clearly inept in the matter of women, wives, and marriage.¹³ This crucial failing receives much divine attention in Abraham's education. That he should need instruction in these matters should not surprise us.

* * *

Abraham is eager to be the founder of a great nation. But he has an incomplete understanding of how a nation becomes truly great. It must, of course, be able to preserve itself, to survive in a world threatened by its enemies and by those who would profit from its downfall. Accordingly, it requires leadership and manly prowess, to rule the unruly and to inspire the timid, at the very least in order to safeguard what is their own, perhaps even to expand and extend their influence and dominion. These matters Abraham likely can see for himself.

But virtuous leaders, indispensable especially for founding, cannot secure a nation's greatness alone; nor can they alone preserve their own great name. Their own mortality—which is in large part a spur to their ambition—necessitates a concern for perpetuation, for progeny, for the next generation. However manly the man, founding a great nation is absolutely dependent on woman, on her generative power. She holds the key to the future, not only by her natural capacity to give birth,

¹³ Four of the five episodes in which God intervenes without telling Abraham concern the women: the first and fourth with Sarah, the second and fifth with Hagar. The central episode concerns the rescue of Lot, without his wife; the sequel involves father-daughter incest. There is thus good reason to believe that the beginning of the education for the new way will be an education regarding sex, marriage, and procreation.

but also by her moral and educative influence over her children, an influence itself rooted in the powerful mother-child bond imposed by natural necessity. This educative influence is all the more important because natural excellence cannot be counted on in each generation: the sons of the founder rarely have the father's virtue (and the greater the virtues of the founder, the less the likelihood that they will be replicated), yet they must be reared well enough to replace him and perpetuate his successes and his ways. Rearing becomes still more important—indeed, supremely important—if the ways of the fathers are to be not the typical ways of mankind uninstructed, but the ways of a people devoted to righteousness and holiness. For all these reasons, founding and sustaining a great and godly nation is absolutely dependent on women, and not just any women, but the right women: women who are able to attach their husbands to the high-minded and reverent rearing of the next generation.

It is no wonder that Abraham, to begin with, does not understand this truth. Rarely do great men, with great dreams, like to acknowledge their dependence, least of all on the seemingly weaker sex. Strong men are not easily domesticated. Ambitious men do not readily accept the need for those who will replace them. Proud men are not given to yielding to their wives. Before he can become a founder, and even a proper father, he must become a proper husband and appreciate Sarah as a wife.

In the course of educating him for the work of founding, God will exploit Abraham's childlessness to move him forward, holding the prospect of his own offspring before him as a carrot. In part to teach Sarah and Abraham that children are a gift, not a human achievement, God delays the birth of Isaac. But the delay is also indispensable for educating father-to-be Abraham regarding the importance of woman and, in particular, the meaning of wife and the meaning of marriage—the subjects of the next chapter.

Chapter Ten: Educating Father Abraham: The Meaning of Marriage

Leon R. Kass

The primordial relations of human life are the relations of the household, first among which is the relation of man and woman as husband and wife. But man and woman are not by nature husband and wife. Marriage is a conventional institution, not merely a natural one. Nature may, to some extent, point the way, but it is clearly insufficient: natural sexual desire does not require, and natural human eros does not necessarily respect, the instituted bonds and boundaries of matrimony. Law, custom, and instruction are everywhere needed to shape and transform the natural attractions between man and woman into the social and moral relations of husband and wife.¹

Up to this point in Genesis, we have had no positive instruction about marriage and no teaching about the meaning of “husband” or “wife.” The only explicit moral-legal teaching to date, the Noahide code, is silent on this subject. To be sure, the different emerging nations will all have their differing sexual and marital customs, but virtually nothing has been said about them in the text, and certainly not by God. Abraham will be the first human being to receive any instruction in family matters, yet even here the manner of education will be somewhat indirect. Thus, if we wish to follow closely God’s education of Abraham regarding marriage, we should remind ourselves of the uninstructed or “natural” ways of human sexuality.

The natural elements of the relationship between the sexes were revealed in the account of the primordial couple, living in the absence of law and custom in the Garden of Eden, previously discussed in Chapter Three. There, with the text’s help, three aspects of human sexual love were distinguished, each with different implications for the relationship between man and woman: (1) lustful sexual desire, seeking bodily union; (2) the love of the beautiful and admirable, seeking not merely sexual gratification but approval and admiration from the one worthy beloved; and (3) generative love, the complex attachment of man and woman, tied to their care for and involvement with their common children.

The most basic aspect of sexual love is sexual desire itself, experienced as needy incompleteness and issuing in lust for bodily union with one’s “missing half.” This primordial and possessive erotic desire is experienced as the love of one’s own, more precisely, the love of one’s own flesh.² The first element of sexual love is literally selfish: the other appears lovable because she is (regarded as) same, because she is (or seems to be) oneself.

The second element of sexual love is tied to human awareness of the shame-filled meaning of

¹ The first and most obvious example of such cultural delimitation of natural sexual activity is the near-universal taboo on incest, a subject, as we shall see, of central importance for the present chapter and for God’s new way.

² This aspect found expression in the narcissistic and possessive speech of the man aroused by the first sight of the woman: “This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh; and this shall be called Woman [‘ishah] because from Man [‘ish] this was taken” (2:23). (For the most radical meaning of “love of one’s own flesh,” see our discussion in Chapter Three, especially n. 7.)

sexual nakedness.³ Proudly self-conscious human beings recognize with chagrin that sexuality means needy dependence on another, one who is not our own and not under our command; that sexuality means enslavement to a disobedient appetite that embarrasses our claim to self-command and that wants of us more than we understand; and that sexuality means perishability, providing as it does for those who will replace us. Eager now for approbation and afraid of rejection, man and woman seek not just sexual gratification, but also approval, praise, respect and esteem in the eyes of the other. The ugly is covered over (the fig leaf), the body is adorned and beautified, and elemental lust is transformed into lofty eros, as lovers seek to transcend their shameful apartness through mutual pursuit of beauty and nobility.

The third element of sexual love concerns generativity, the bearing and rearing of children. This entails painful childbirth for the woman, domestication of the man, division of labor and its attendant dangers of conflict, inequality and rule, and yet also the creative, regenerative, and redemptive possibility of renewal through children. In the face of the harsh reality of human life, generativity—especially the woman’s power to bear—holds out hope for transcendence of separation, duality, and mortality.⁴ Woman is a generating and creative force, with powers man can regard either with awe and gratitude or, rather, with envy and resentment, both because he has no share in them and because he is absolutely dependent on woman for his existence and perpetuation.

In uninstructed relations between man and woman, these three elements of human erotic love coexist warily side by side and often come into conflict. Self-love and the selfish love of one’s own are at odds with love of the other and the self-forgetting love of the beautiful. Both are at odds with the self-sacrificing love of a child, seen as one’s replacement: a man’s love of his beautiful beloved may be at odds with her desire or love for children. Besides, each partner (as male or female) has nonidentical interests and desires, whose differences not only incite union but also threaten divorce.⁵

Furthermore, none of the elements of human sexuality is unambiguously good: possessive male lust for union can be degrading to woman, making her but an object of man’s satisfaction (as we shall soon see in the story of Pharaoh and Sarah); excessive “love of one’s own flesh” means incest (as we shall see in the story of Lot and his daughters); pride-filled love of beauty and concern for self-esteem can give rise to jealousy, discord, and bloodshed (as we saw in the rapacious conduct of the sons of God toward the beautiful daughters of man [6:2], which heralded the chaotic battles of the heroes [see Chapter Five]); and womanly pride in her generative capacity can give rise to domestic strife, injustice, and impiety (as we saw in Eve’s boastful celebration of the birth of Cain, who,

³ This, the reader will recall, was the first discovery gained from the dangerous knowledge of good and bad: “And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves girdles” (3:6-7).

⁴ This simultaneously divisive and unifying aspect of sexuality appeared in the text with God’s grim forecast of the human future, vexingly different for woman and man, a future whose only glimmer of hope is immediately seized upon by the man when he renames the woman “Eve,” “because she was the mother of all living” (3:16-20).

⁵ Division of labor, inequality, and rule and authority enter the sexual picture with the coming of children: the woman’s desire, God predicted, would be to her man, and he would rule over her; he, in turn, would toil and trouble to provide for her and her children (3:16-19).

bearing his mother's pride, kills his brother out of wounded pride and jealousy [see Chapter Four], and as we shall soon see in the rivalry between Sarah and Hagar and, later, between sisters Leah and Rachel). Man and woman, left to their own devices, are bound for trouble.

Taming the dangerous female pride in her generative powers, which led Eve to boast that "I have gotten a man [equally] with God," is relatively easy: institute a prolonged period of barrenness before allowing childbirth, so that the woman (and her husband) will understand that a child is not the woman's creation and possession, but an unmerited gift. In keeping with this strategy, three of the four Israelite matriarchs—Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel—will become mothers only after long periods of infertility.⁶ But taming male possessive lust or correcting man's pride-filled love of womanly beauty or combating his indifference to—or even resentment of and flight from—the need for procreation is vastly more difficult, as is inducing him to stand rightly with respect to his wife as the prospective mother of his children. Educating a man to esteem woman as mother and to respect the task of moral and spiritual transmission is all the more difficult if he is, like Abraham, personally ambitious for fame and glory. All the more reason, then, why we should expect instruction regarding the meaning of marriage to be a central part of God's education of Abraham. That he badly needs such education we learn in the episode that follows almost immediately after he responds to God's call.

Abram in Egypt: Wife, or Sister?

When the Lord calls and commands him to go, Abram answers the call and goes as commanded. But he does not go alone, for "Lot went with him, and Abram was 75 years old when he departed out of Haran" (12:4). Perhaps out of responsibility for his dead brother's son, perhaps because he still clings to his family of origin, but perhaps because he regards Lot as tacit heir apparent, Abram (entirely on his own initiative) takes Lot along on his divinely appointed mission. Whether Abram intends this or not, Lot, an as-it-were adopted son, represents perpetuation insurance for a man who wants to found a great nation and whose 65-year-old wife is barren. When Abram arrives in Canaan with his little band, he makes his way to the oracular tree at Mamre (near Shechem), perhaps to consult the oracle, for "the Canaanite was then in the land" (12:6).⁷ In response both to Abram's

⁶ Countering the danger of excessive and smothering maternal love of children is another matter, not so easily dealt with. We shall touch briefly on this matter in our discussions of the covenant of circumcision in Chapter 11 and again when we take up the relation of Jacob and his mother in Chapter 14.

⁷ Yuval Levin, in a marvelous essay, "The Promised Land: Canaan and the Covenant in the Book of Genesis," written for my 2000-2001 Genesis class, comments on this verse:

That "the Canaanite was then in the land" seems obvious—who but the Canaanite would be in the land of Canaan? But the next line tells us who: Abram. Before this, land and people defined each other in a simple natural way. The Canaanite lived in Canaan, the Urite in Ur, the Egyptian in Egypt. The name of the land reminded the people only of themselves, and the name of the people reminded others only of their land. There is something about God's action regarding Abram that runs against the grain of this way in which things naturally fall. God must put a non-Canaanite into the land of Canaan, to get away from the simple natural way of things. To be a Canaanite in Canaan requires no effort, no action, no thought. To be a Hebrew in Canaan will require attention and exertion. The uneasy and less than obvious juxtaposition of people and land will be a constant reminder that someone has made this happen; it did not happen on its own. This, in turn, might hopefully turn the Hebrews' attention to

obedience in hearkening to His command and to his likely perplexity in finding the land occupied, God appears to Abram, promising that He will, in the future, assign this land to Abram's seed—by silent implication, not to him. Abram, presumably in gratitude and awe, builds an altar.⁸

But the promised land proves even more unpromising, owing to famine. Abram goes, uninstructed, to Egypt, the fertile place, to gain food, that is, to secure his own preservation. In this place, as the descendant of Shem meets the descendants of Ham, Abram has his first instructive encounter with another nation. In Egypt, the place of sustenance for the body but of mortal danger for the soul, Abram's education begins.⁹ Prefiguring the experience of his descendants who will later be enslaved in Egypt, Abram endures being a stranger in a strange land. He encounters the decadent and unjust ways of the greatest civilized nation, the alternative to what will become God's new way. He learns what it is like to be treated unjustly because one is a stranger: he suffers firsthand what happens when people prefer the love of their own (self-love) to the requirements of justice. But truth to tell, Abram acquiesces in this common error by repeating it, in his dealings with his own wife.

And it came to pass, when he was come near to enter into Egypt, that he said unto Sarai, his wife: "Behold please [*hineh-na'*], I know thou art a woman beautiful to look upon [*yefat-mar'eh*]. And it will come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see thee, that they will say: 'This is his wife'; and they will kill me, but let thee live. Say, I pray thee, that thou art my sister, that it may go well with me for thy sake and that my soul may live because of thee." (12:11-13)

that someone: to God.... By giving Canaan to non-Canaanites, God is acting against the simple order of things, and ensuring that things will never settle down in the promised land. There will always be a question about the validity of the new people's claim on the land, and the question will always point to the answer, the God of Abraham. God's new way would not succeed among a people who simply let things be as they are; it demands a people willing to become what they have not always been.

This profound reflection shows how starting with a foreigner is God's response to the natural emergence of nations descended from the sons of Noah, described in Genesis 10 (and briefly considered in Chapter Eight, especially in the first footnote). Because our interests lie elsewhere, we shall ourselves not be following up this very important subject of the "promised land," what Levin astutely calls "a central silent character in the narrative of Genesis."

⁸ In the immediate sequel, Abram moves to the mountain on the east of Beth-El, builds another altar, and calls on the name of the Lord. (Our interpretive suggestion: "Are you here also, Lord?") The Lord does not respond. Especially in a world in which people understand the gods to be gods of specific places, Abram, who could have no independent way of knowing that the Lord is indeed God everywhere, might have been dismayed at this result. If so, we can more readily understand his choice to continue wandering and his independent decision to go down to Egypt, the place of his next adventure and trial.

⁹ Why does Abraham's education begin in Egypt? Why, generations later, will the Israelite nation emerge only out of a contest with Egypt? If we could know the "essence" of Egypt, at least as the Bible understands it, we might be able to understand how Israel emerges in opposition to what is Egyptian. We shall consider this matter later in the book, when we come to the story of Joseph.

In this, his very first biblical utterance, Abram speaks to his wife about her beauty and the danger it now poses. Fearing for his life, he asks Sarai to deny their marriage and to pose as his sister, fully expecting that the Egyptians will be attracted by her beauty and interested in having her. Events will show that his fears are well founded—if anything, even underestimated. He does not reckon that it will be Pharaoh himself who will take her, sight unseen, on the recommendation of his henchmen, who are apparently always on the prowl for their master, rounding up beautiful women for his harem:

And it came to pass, that, when Abram was come into Egypt, the Egyptians beheld the woman that she was very beautiful. And the princes [*sarey*] of Pharaoh saw her, and praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. (12a4-15)

Abram has a genuine dilemma, with which one must sympathize: either he can try to save his own life at the expense of his wife's honor, or he can risk his likely death, after which his wife will also be taken (only this time as a widow). Thinking about God's promise of his becoming a great nation, Abram may well reason that it depends on his own survival even more than it depends on Sarai's fidelity and marital chastity; and should he have considered the matter, he probably concluded that there was no risk of confounding his lineage through adulterous union, for Sarai was barren. Indeed, there is no evidence that Abram at first believed that his becoming a great nation depended on his having his own progeny: had not Nimrod, in his own lifetime, created a great empire, presumably by conquest? But whatever his motive or reasons, in his choice his priorities are clear: he places self-preservation above marriage. Abram in his heart willingly commits Sarai to adultery.

Some might say that Abram should have trusted in God to protect him, but they read with hindsight; Abram would have had no reason to rely on God. God had not sent him to Egypt, God did not promise to protect him. And for all Abram knew, God might have no power in Egypt, which had its own gods, among them apparently Pharaoh himself. Under these circumstances, Abram's conduct could be justified, and not only as a matter of prudence in the face of necessity: if Abram is to realize the divine promise, he might even have an (inferred) duty to keep himself alive, at all costs. This is not only his opinion: Sarai, his wife, accedes to his request, willingly dishonoring herself for his sake, honoring instead his request "that it may go well with me...and that my soul may live because of thee."

The deception succeeds. Not only is Abram's life spared; Pharaoh does well by Abram for her sake. In exchange for his "sister," he acquires sheep, oxen, he-asses, menservants, maidservants,¹⁰ she-asses, and camels.

But Abram's choice is at best unsavory, at worst criminal and unholy; and his own conduct aside, the fate of Sarai is offensive to the Lord, who "plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues *because of Sarai, Abram's wife*" (12:17; emphasis added). For Pharaoh she was a nameless beauty fit for the harem, for Abram she could be passed off as his sister (his "own flesh"), but for God she was Sarai, Abram's wife. God intervenes to end this adulterous (and cross-cultural) liaison because He cares for Sarai, but for Sarai especially as Abram's wife. Unlike Abram, God, it seems, is concerned to defend the dignity of woman as wife. What this means, we—along with Abram—must gradually learn, for we—and he—are not here given any reasons, at least by God.

¹⁰ Including, presumably, Hagar the Egyptian, later Sarai's slavegirl.

After putting plague and plague together and coming up with adultery,¹¹ Pharaoh—not God—rebukes Abram for his deception:

“What is this that thou hast done unto me? Why didst thou not tell me that she was thy wife? Why saidst thou, ‘She is my sister,’ so that I took her to be my wife? Now therefore behold thy wife, take her and go!” (12:18-19)

Pharaoh blames Abram, with justification, for Abram had lied, though he might also have faulted his own predatory behavior; and though Pharaoh tacitly offers the principle—no adultery—he does so only out of his own current afflictions.¹² Absent the plagues, there is no evidence that he would have regretted the adultery, or that he would not have killed for the woman as Abram had feared.

Abram makes no response to Pharaoh’s complaint, but one should not conclude that he has learned his lesson. The reader has been told, but Abram was not, that God is behind Pharaoh’s change of heart and Sarai’s deliverance. True, Abram might harbor suspicions along these lines; he sees that there are limits to Pharaoh’s power, that this demigod and ruler of *the* supreme human society must yield. But it is doubtful that Abram now knows that he himself must honor his wife.¹³ On the contrary, he leaves Egypt a wealthy man (12:16;13:2); it has indeed gone “well with him on account of Sarai.” Not only has he profited from his deception and “wife sacrifice”; it may even seem to him that his newly acquired wealth constitutes the beginning of the fulfillment of God’s promised prosperity. (A truly nasty reader may even suspect that Abram has discovered the profit available in running the oldest profession.)

The attentive reader may learn from this story that though one may choose a wife, one cannot choose what “wife” means, that a wife is not transmutable into a sister or a concubine when it serves one’s purposes. But Abram does not yet understand this. God’s plagues made Pharaoh the instrument of instructing Abram about his misdeeds, but Abram doesn’t get the point, partly because of who brings the message and how he delivers it, partly because Abram comes to no harm and indeed grows rich from his bad behavior. He is very likely quite impressed by his success in Egypt, and much more than he is by any suspicion that the founder of a great nation must not be indifferent to who becomes the mother of his children (or who fathers the children born to his wife). Abram is not yet ready to become a father or a founder of God’s new way.

Sarai, too, may not be ready, though we are given no help from the text about her thoughts and feelings. She had freely complied with Abram’s request without a reported word just as Abram had freely complied with God’s command. Whether from slavish obedience to the rule of her husband or (more likely) from noble generosity to save her husband’s life and to serve his great calling, Sarai

¹¹ The nature of the plagues is not indicated, but it is likely that they were somehow connected to sexuality—for example, genital boils or impotence—so that Pharaoh could infer from them their probable cause. (The Hebrew root for plague, *n-g-*, can mean both “to afflict or plague” and “to molest or harass sexually.”) Confronting Sarai as the likely cause of the problem—she alone would not be afflicted with the plagues—Pharaoh would have almost certainly been able to extract a confession from her.

¹² Pharaoh, complaining about what Abram “hast done unto me,” makes no mention of the plagues suffered by his household. His attitude and concerns should be contrasted with the more public-spirited response of Abimelech, king of Gerar, when he finds himself in a similar position.

¹³ He will later again pass Sarah off as his sister, with Abimelech.

allows herself to be abandoned as wife and used for a monarch's pleasure. This is said not to judge or cast blame; no doubt Sarai's position was very weak, and she could hardly have done otherwise even had she wished to. But she participated willingly—unlike, say, Isabella in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*—in her own degradation. In deed if not in wish, she allowed her husband—and Pharaoh—to rule over her with utterly no regard to her personal well-being or, more important to the story of the new way, to her position as Abram's wife. As we shall see, it will be Sarah's later assertion of her place as wife that will finally teach Abraham about the meaning of marriage and how it is related to his founding mission.¹⁴

The adventure in Egypt does result, perhaps, in one small sign of movement on Abram's part. When Abram had left Haran, he “took Sarai, his wife, Lot, his brother's son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran” (12:5). But when he goes up out of Egypt, he goes first “with his wife, and all that he had,” and (last) “together with Lot” (13:1).¹⁵ There seems to be, indirectly, a greater closeness to his wife, manifested in a new distancing from Lot as possible heir, a distancing that is completed in the next adventure or trial. There, thanks in part to the great wealth first accumulated in Egypt, Abram parts with Lot to avoid fratricidal conflict. (Lot, choosing first, takes the well-watered plain of the Jordan, which looked to him “like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt” [13:10]; whatever might be the case with Abram, Lot has not had enough of things Egypt-like.) When this happens, Abram is left without even an adopted son.

Hagar the Egyptian: The Wife Surrogate

In the first episode that threatened their marriage, Abram acted toward his wife entirely without regard to the question of procreation and children. Self-preservation, colored by the desire for God's promised greatness and prosperity, was his animating principle. But a new interest in progeny leads Abram, this time at Sarai's behest, to threaten his marriage a second time, and in a manner that reveals how the shadow of the Egyptian adventure continues to hover over husband and wife. This episode should be approached by briefly noting its preparatory antecedents.

Sometime after he and Lot separate, Abram enters the war of the kings in order to rescue Lot, who had been captured by the invading Babylonians when they conquered Sodom.¹⁶ His encounter with death in battle produces a change in Abram. After the war, he for the first time expresses an interest in having children. When God appears to him in a vision after his victory and promises him a great reward—“Fear not, Abram, I am thy shield, thy reward shall be exceeding great” (15:1)—Abram, fearfully contemplating his mortality, complains for the first time of his childlessness. Abram, who had said nothing when God first called him, speaks out—in this, his first reported and directly quoted speech to God—to bemoan his lack of seed, his lack of a proper heir:

“O Lord God, what wilt Thou give me, seeing I shall die [*literally*, I shall go] childless, and the one in charge of my house is Eliezer of Damascus....Behold, to me Thou hast given no seed, and, lo, my steward will be my heir.” (15:2-3)

¹⁴ I happily confess that I owe the insights and instruction in this paragraph to my wife.

¹⁵ Compare this voluntarily undertaken small shift toward the wife with the failure of Noah to effect a comparable shift—in his case, commanded—when he and his family were leaving the ark. (See Chapter Seven.)

¹⁶ This trial will be discussed in the next chapter.

God responds by saying that not the steward but “he that shall spring from your own loins shall be your heir” (15:4). In the awe-inspiring covenant between the sacrificial pieces that follows, God gives Abram some bad news: not he but only his seed will inherit the land, and then only after they have suffered 400 years of slavery as strangers in a strange land. God concludes with remarks about Abram’s own fate:

“But thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age. And in the fourth generation they shall come back hither.” (15:15-16)

Forced by God directly to contemplate his own death, Abram now more than ever longs for a son. It is in this frame of mind that, in the immediate sequel, he receives and eagerly accepts Sarai’s offer to try to have a child of his own by Hagar the Egyptian.

Abram no doubt recalls God’s prophecy of an heir sprung “from your own loins” when opportunity knocks, in a novel proposal tendered by Sarai, who is still, now 10 years later (at age 75), unable to conceive.

Now Sarai, *Abram’s wife* [*‘ishah*], bore him no children; and she had a slave girl, *an Egyptian*, whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said unto Abram: “Behold please [*hineh-na’*], the Lord hath restrained me from bearing: go in, I pray thee, unto my slavegirl; perhaps I shall be builded up [*or I shall have a son*] through her.” And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai. And Sarai, *Abram’s wife*, took *Hagar the Egyptian*, her slavegirl, after Abram had dwelt 10 years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to Abram, *her husband*, to be his wife [*or concubine: ‘ishah*]. And he went in unto Hagar and she conceived. (16:2-4; emphasis added).

Sarai is desperate for children. In this, her very first quoted utterance (and her first words to her husband), she announces herself in terms of her barrenness.¹⁷ But although she is frustrated by her inability to bear Abram an heir, she is not without resource or power. And although she attributes her infertility to the Lord, she does not recommend or resort to prayer. Instead, she offers Abram concubine surrogate, following a custom well documented in the ancient Near East. In a gesture seemingly self-effacing, she hopes instead to be “builded up” in his esteem and in her power. And Abram, not the last man to believe that God helps those who help themselves, readily accepts the offer: here is a chance for the promised son out of his own loins.

God neither interferes with nor approves the surrogate arrangement. But the text, in telling of this exchange, hints loudly at the difficulties. Sarai is twice said to be Abram’s wife and he her husband: how then can Hagar be his wife? And how can any resulting child be truly Sarai’s? How will the slavegirl view her mistress—and her husband—should she bear the master’s child? We are forewarned: should Hagar become pregnant, the lineage will be confounded and marital harmony challenged. And there is more: Abram’s child will have an Egyptian mother—just as Sarai in Pharaoh’s house might have born a son to an Egyptian father.

As these final observations suggest, the present episode is in several respects the mirror image of the episode in Egypt. In Egypt, Abram asked Sarai to disown the marriage and accept another

¹⁷ In Abram’s first speech to Sarai—which also began, “Behold, please” (12:11)—Abram had spoken of her beauty; Sarai, by contrast, is focused on her lack of maternity. This difference between the way the man looks at his woman and the way the woman looks at herself is unlikely to be accidental or peculiar to Abram and Sarai.

partner, for his sake (“that it may be well with me”), and she obliged. Here, Sarai asks Abram to take another partner and in a sense disown the marriage, for her sake (“perhaps I shall be builded up”), and he obliges. In Egypt, Abram (and Pharaoh) seemed to exercise rule and power; here, Sarai seems to be in charge and Abram obeys: “And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai.”¹⁸ The mirroring of the two stories also invites thought about justice and retribution. For whether she knows it or not, Sarai’s proposal amounts to measure-for-measure payback for the near-adulterous liaison in Egypt. Just as Abram had pushed Sarai into adultery with Pharaoh, so Sarai pushes Abram into quasi-adultery (actually, polygamy) with Hagar, this time casting herself, as it were, in the role of “sister.” Just as Abram had been moved by fear for his life and perhaps also the desire for gain, so Sarai is moved by shame and the desire for advancement: neither Abram nor Sarai shows any regard for their joint future as husband and wife. Lest there be any doubt about the connection of the two episodes, Hagar is clearly identified as “Hagar the Egyptian,” a legacy and part of the wealth gained in the wife-sister misrepresentation with Pharaoh. Abram is induced to imitate Pharaoh in beginning a harem; he accepts a quasi-adulterous threat to his marriage for the sake of progeny—whereas, in Egypt, he had proposed it for the sake of his own survival.¹⁹ (It is worth noting that the Bible’s first two episodes of adultery or near adultery arise not from lust but from calculation. That they are nonetheless problematic shows that the trouble with adultery—in the Bible’s view—may be more its threat to lineage, social identity, and transmission than its cost in alienating marital affections.)

The result is as we feared: the surrogacy stratagem backfires.

And he went in unto Hagar and she conceived, and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes. And Sarai said unto Abram, “The outrage against me is upon thee [*that is*, is because of you, is your fault]: I myself put my slavegirl in thy lap and when she saw she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes. May the Lord judge between me and thee!” And Abram said to Sarai, “Behold, thy slavegirl is in thy hand; do to her whatever seems good in thine eyes.” (16:4-6)

Hagar—fertile like Egypt, from whence she came—conceives and, as a result, shows contempt for Sarai. Sarai, who had hoped to be builded up, is in fact lowered down. In the Bible’s first reported two-way dialogue between wife and husband, she petulantly blames Abram for this state of affairs and quarrels with him. To keep peace in the household, he defers to her, telling her to do with the maid as she pleases (proving, by the way, that he cares not for Hagar herself; she was to him but a

¹⁸ This remark ominously recalls the beginning of God’s complaint against Adam after the transgression (3:17). In the Garden of Eden, hearkening to his wife meant, of course, not hearkening to (obeying) God. Here, no such disobedience can be implied, as no commandments about marriage have yet been given. Indeed, later in this chapter we shall see how God weighs in on the side of hearkening to one’s wife, telling Abraham to do whatever Sarah says. What all this implies for the meaning of marriage and for the prophecy “Your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you” we shall take up at the end of the chapter.

¹⁹ This episode is but one of numerous instances in biblical narrative in which unsavory actions, even those undertaken as a matter of strict necessity, later receive their retributive answer. Harm and wrong, even if necessary, do not cease to be harm and wrong, and the one who is responsible—or, more often, his descendants—will be paid back. The biblical author is not a Machiavellian: necessity may justify, but it does not simply excuse, and the world remembers misconduct. As Robert Sacks has beautifully put it, “Deeds get hidden away in rocks; they do not disappear.”

seedbed). At least at this point, Abram chooses to support his wife over against the mother of his child-to-be.²⁰

But Abram cannot solve the problem created by his sowing his seed in, so to speak, foreign soil. Sarai, in an inversion of the later Egyptian oppression of the Israelites, deals harshly with Hagar, who flees from her mistress. God intervenes (through a messenger)²¹ to comfort Hagar but also to urge her to return to Sarai and to submit to her hand. As a compensation, He informs Hagar that she will bear a son whose name shall be Ishmael (“God heareth”), who “shall be a wild ass of a man; his hand shall be against every man, and every man’s hand against him; and he shall dwell in the face of all his brethren” (16:12).²² Ishmael is described in terms suitable for the utterly natural child that he is, sprung from his father’s loins but conceived without regard to the permanence of marriage or to the difference between the ways of Egypt and the ways of God.²³ Three times in the last two verses of the story (16:15-16) does the text rub our nose in the fact that it was Hagar, not Sarai, who bore a son, Ishmael, to Abram (when the latter was 86 years old).

To readers familiar with the subsequent turn of events, God’s intervention may seem puzzling. If there is something wrong with surrogate motherhood and the tensions it causes for the marriage,

²⁰ The psychological genius of the biblical text is wonderfully illustrated in this marital exchange. People—especially those who are close—often blame others (especially their partners) for their own foolishness, yet not without some justification. For example: “You didn’t correct my error; you even acted on it; therefore, you must have wished for it yourself” Or: “You agreed that I might be built up by having a child; you too must think that my childlessness is a disgrace; therefore, you must share in Hagar’s contempt for me.” Likewise, people are often willing to escape all responsibility for their complicity in folly by washing their hands of the matter. Although they may be moved by a desire to avoid conflict and to restore peace, they are thereby complicitly responsible for what happens as a result of their withdrawal—as much as they were by originally acquiescing in the foolish deed.

²¹ As Robert Alter points out, “This is the first occurrence of an ‘angel’ (Hebrew *mal’akh*, Greek, *angelos*) in Genesis.... ‘Messenger,’ or one who carries out a designated task, is the primary meaning of the Hebrew term, and there are abundant biblical instances of *mal’akhim* who are strictly human emissaries. One assumes that the divine messenger in these stories is supposed to look like a human being, and all post-biblical associations with wings, halos, and glorious raiment must be firmly excluded.... [It is anyone’s guess how the Hebrew imagination conceived agents of the Lord 3,000 years ago, and it is certainly possible that the original traditions had a blurry notion of the difference between God’s own interventions in human life and those of His emissaries.”

²² The expression “in the face” is the literal translation of *‘al-peney*, often translated “before” or “in the presence of” or even “in the company of.” But the confrontational and oppositional connotation is ever present, as it is in our current idiom “in your face.”

²³ The text offers what may be a small hint regarding this difference. The messenger of the Lord, in offering Hagar the name of Ishmael (“God heareth”) for her son, explains the name by saying, “The Lord hath heard thy affliction” (16:11). But Hagar called the name of the Lord who spoke unto her “God Who Sees Me” (*‘el ra’i*; 16:13). The difference between the Lord who speaks and hears and who expects His followers to hearken and a divine being who sees and/or is seen may well reflect the difference between the beliefs and ways of Israel and the beliefs and ways of Egypt. This theme of hearing and seeing will return in the story of the binding of Isaac, discussed in Chapter 11.

and if Isaac (later to be born to Sarah) is to be the proper heir, why not just let Hagar flee with her unborn child? Perhaps it is necessary for their education regarding marriage that Sarai and (especially) Abram live with the consequences of their mistake. Though He comforts Hagar, God weighs in on Sarai's side of the dispute, urging Hagar to accept her mistress's harsh punishment for her vaunting over her fertility. Yet the presence of Hagar in the house can only continue to aggravate Sarai, especially once Ishmael is born. More important, God's action here guarantees that Abram will have the merely natural—and hence unsuitable—heir he wants in Ishmael. Yet because of the presence of Ishmael and his rivalry with Isaac, Abram will later have to face the fact that concubinage and surrogacy are incompatible with marriage rightly understood, at least within the new way.

The attempt to pinch-hit for the wife, possibly innocent in intent, is thus, in result, anything but. Not only is there still potential trouble in the household; worse, Abram will later be compelled to banish his firstborn son, and the descendants of Ishmael will later make trouble for the descendants of Isaac—as they do until the present day. But for the time being, thanks to their error, both Abram and Sarai—and the reader—may perhaps stand a bit closer to discovering the meaning of wife and the meaning of marriage: Abram, that a wife is more than a seedbed; Sarai, conversely, that bearing the child oneself is important; both of them, that joint rearing even more than bearing may be the true work of husband and wife. But before they can really be ready for the work of rearing, they will need even more to discover that the fulfillment of their relation as husband and wife depends finally on providence. They must remain open to procreation within the marriage, against all odds, trusting in higher than human powers—rather than human resourcefulness—to deliver the wished-for gift of life.

Abraham in Gerar: Wife and Sister?

Abram will soon have one more chance to demonstrate his understanding of the meaning of marriage and his trust in divine providence regarding procreation within the marriage. But before he can be tested in this matter, he needs some explicit and authoritative instruction. This he receives when God introduces the subject in the very next episode, the central story of the covenant of circumcision (to be discussed at length in the next chapter). In the course of His speech to Abram announcing the new covenant, God renames Abram as Abraham (“father of multitudes”) and tells him that Sarai “thy wife” will henceforth be renamed Sarah (still “princess”). More important, God tells a disbelieving Abraham (age 99)²⁴ that He will give him a son by Sarah (age 89), that He will bless her, and that she will be a mother of nations, with kings of peoples springing from her (17:16). Abraham, incredulous, laughs (*yitschak*) in disbelief and perhaps even in bitterness and derision, and he says “in his heart: ‘Shall a child be born to a hundred-year-old, and shall Sarah that is 90 years old give birth?’” (17:17). Abraham clearly prefers the son in the flesh to the one in the mind. He says to God, “O that Ishmael might live before thee” (17:18). But God, rebuking him, insists on the importance of the right son, by the right mother, which is to say by his wife: “Nay, but Sarah, *thy wife*, shall bear thee a son...and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his seed after him” (17:19; emphasis added). Ishmael, God says, He will bless on Abraham's account, with fruitfulness and 12 princely descendants, and He will make of him also a great nation (17:20). But, pointedly again addressing Abraham's disbelief, God concludes by re-emphasizing that the covenant here being established will be transmitted only through his wife's son, Isaac: “But My

²⁴ That is, 24 years after the promise of great nationhood and 13 years after the birth of Ishmael.

covenant will I establish with Isaac, whom *Sarah shall bear* unto thee at this set time in the next year” (17:21; emphasis added).

Sarah, for her part, also will get a birth announcement and, with it, an opportunity to demonstrate trust in God’s promise. It is delivered shortly after the circumcision, by the three strangers (men-messengers) who visit Abraham in his tent. Abraham immediately offers them superb hospitality, the excellence of which partly depends on the fact that Sarah is present to help out. (This well-ordered household is sharply contrasted with that of Lot, living in Sodom, to whom the same strangers next come. There, Mrs. Lot, a native Sodomite, is out of the picture, and in a parody of hospitality, the poorly wived Lot is compelled to offer his own daughters to a rapacious mob in order to try to save his guests from homosexual rape. The same daughters will later commit incest with their father.) Sarah overhears one of the stranger-messengers tell Abraham that within the year, “Sarah, thy wife, shall have a son” (18:10). Sarah, like Abraham in the last episode, laughs in disbelief within herself: “After *I am waxed old* shall I have pleasure, *my lord being so old?*” (18:12; emphasis added). In a delicate touch, God, in repeating Sarah’s response to Abraham, tactfully alters it to omit any reference to Abraham’s advanced age (“Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I surely bear a child, *I who am old?*’ “ [18:13; emphasis added]), and He reiterates His promise that Sarah will next year have a son, rebuking them both with the rhetorical question, “Is anything beyond the Lord?” (18:14). Sarah, in response, is now chastened and denies that she laughed, “for she was afraid” (18:15). But the Lord, leaving her, insists, “No, but thou didst laugh.”²⁵ Retaining hope in the promise of a child, we are given to understand, is no laughing matter. Neither is trusting—or not trusting—in the word of the Lord and in His promise of intramarital procreation.

Despite God’s repeated and reassuring promises of a child of their own, promises made to both husband and wife, Abraham fails to honor his wife and their marital bond. He again abandons his wife to a prince’s harem at the first available opportunity. Traveling in the land of Gerar, after witnessing the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (19:27-29), Abraham (although the text here again insists that she is his wife) announces to the nations that Sarah is his sister (20:2); and Abimelech (“father of the king”), king of Gerar, sends for Sarah and takes her for his harem. (Those who refuse to believe that an 89-year-old woman could attract a king’s desire have not properly imagined how extraordinarily beautiful Sarah really was, perhaps all the more so now that she is rejuvenated as a result of the news of her imminent motherhood. The less erotic may prefer, as an alternative, that the king may have sought through this union an alliance with Abraham for reasons of political or economic gain.)

Given the announcement of Sarah’s impending pregnancy, Abraham’s conduct here is especially hard to fathom: perhaps, as he will later say when his lie is exposed, he still fears for his life; perhaps he is simply continuing a practice that proved so profitable to him in Egypt. But whatever his motive, in passing Sarah off as his sister Abraham displays a certain recklessness with the promise of Sarah’s restored fertility. Could it be that he is still banking on the ascendancy of Ishmael, his firstborn? Does Abraham doubt God’s word about Sarah? Could Abraham, fresh from experiencing the dreadful

²⁵ This, as Bill Rosen pointed out to me, is God’s first speech to a woman since He chastised Eve in the Garden of Eden. Fittingly, it also concerns childbirth and the woman’s lack of trust in God’s word. This, as Bill Rosen pointed out to me, is God’s first speech to a woman since He chastised Eve in the Garden of Eden. Fittingly, it also concerns childbirth and the woman’s lack of trust in God’s word.

destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, be doubting God altogether?²⁶

Abimelech is a man much superior in virtue to Pharaoh, so God treats him not with plagues but directly, speaking to him in a prophetic dream. In fact, God will use Abimelech, a noble man but one whose virtue lacks the fear of God, to instruct Abraham in the meaning of marriage. In the dream, He informs Abimelech that the woman he has taken is another man's wife, and He threatens to kill him on her account (20:3). Abimelech, who had not come near Sarah, protests his innocence and (in contrast to Pharaoh) his concern for his people:

“Lord [*‘adonai*], wilt Thou slay even a righteous [*tsadik*] nation?²⁷ Said he not himself unto me: ‘She is my sister’? And she, even she herself said: ‘He is my brother.’ In the simplicity [*tam*] of my heart and the innocency of my hands have I done this.” (20:4-5)

God, continuing to speak to him in the dream, does not dispute the allegation of deception by Abraham and Sarah, and He accepts Abimelech's defense, at least in part:

“Yea, I know that in the simplicity of thy heart thou hast done this, and I also withheld thee from sinning against Me. Therefore suffered I thee not to touch her. Now, therefore, restore the man's wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live; and if thou restorest her not, know thou that thou shalt surely die [*literally, dying you will die: mot tamut*],²⁸ thou and all that art thine.” (20:6-7)

God acknowledges that Abimelech acted in the simplicity of his heart, but He does not agree that his hands were completely innocent: Abimelech, a harem keeper, took Sarah, after all, and he still has her; and, God adds, it was He alone who kept Abimelech's hands from touching her. Most important, He informs Abimelech, who though an honorable man seems as yet to have no fear (or awe or reverence) for the Lord, that it was to keep “thee from sinning against Me” that He prevented the adulterous contact. Abimelech is thus the first biblical character to learn that adultery is not only an imprudent act but may be also a sin or an offense against the divine. Promising Abimelech that the “prophet” will intercede for him if he does what is right, God insists that the man's wife be restored to Abraham, under penalty of death.

Awakening early the next morning, Abimelech relates his dream to his servants (slaves); they, like their king, fear for their lives. But Abimelech does not simply save his skin by returning Sarah; he demands an explanation from Abraham. (Pharaoh, we recall, had simply thrown Abram out.) Armed with the knowledge that a powerful god stands opposed to (this) adultery, Abimelech calls Abraham to account, as it were serving as God's own messenger and witness:

²⁶ If he is indeed filled with dread and doubt after Sodom, Abraham would be in a position similar to Noah's after the destructive flood, or perhaps also to his own situation when famine struck the promised land—in response to which Abraham went on his own to Egypt and survived by passing his wife off as his sister.

²⁷ Abimelech's question echoes Abraham's questioning of God in their conversation about the punishment of Sodom: “Wilt thou indeed consume the righteous with the wicked...? Shall not the Judge of the whole earth do justly?” (18:23-25). See Chapter 11 for the discussion of this episode.

²⁸ God uses the same expression that He used when warning man of the deadly consequence of ating from the forbidden tree of knowledge of good and bad (2:17). Adultery is, in God's eyes, a capital matter.

“What hast thou done unto *us*? [compare 12:18] and wherein have I sinned against thee, that thou hast brought on me *and on my kingdom* a great sin? Thou hast done unto me *deeds that ought not be done*.” (20:9; emphasis added)

Abimelech, accusing him of committing an offense against the innocent,²⁹ insists to Abraham that adultery is a great sin, a sin that stains an entire people, a deed that ought not to be done; and he begs for an explanation of how Abraham could have promoted such a heinous deed. When Abraham does not answer, Abimelech continues to question him: “What sawest thou that thou hast done this thing?” (20:10).

Abraham, who on the previous occasion had said nothing to the explosive Pharaoh, now responds with a twofold defense. First, he was afraid of how he as a stranger would be treated:

“Because I thought: Surely the fear [or awe] of God is not in this place; and they will slay me for my wife’s sake.” (20:11)

Abraham’s concern is surely not far-fetched. The love of your own and the mistrust (even hatred) of the stranger are the natural human way. Only when human beings come to realize that the stranger shares in a common humanity, each one equally in the image of God—and in this sense at least, that the stranger may in fact be a god in disguise—will strangers be treated justly (that is, with the “fear-awe of God”).³⁰

But it is Abraham’s second reason that comes as a complete surprise, at least to the reader:

“And moreover she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife.” (20:12)

Sarah was first of all Abraham’s (half) sister, the daughter of Terah; only later did she become his wife. (We understand now the text’s silence, back in Genesis 11, regarding Sarai’s ancestry when it reported on her becoming Abram’s wife. We also see now that *all* the important progenitors of the line of the Israelite patriarchs are children of Terah, descending through two initial endogamous marriages: Abram and his half sister Sarah, Nahor and his niece Milcah, daughter of Terah’s third son, Haran.)³¹

As a defense, Abraham’s speech is obviously defective. Even if Sarah is his half sister, Abraham’s announcement of that truth in fact amounts to a lie: the only relevant fact, namely, that she is also his wife, he fails to reveal. Readers of the text who know that marrying your sister or half-sister is

²⁹ Abraham is thus accused of being just like the Sodomites, whose wickedness causes the righteous to suffer. Robert Licht, observing that Abraham might have concluded from God’s destruction of Sodom that there were no righteous people in cities, suggests that Abraham himself (at least when he comes into the city) proves to be no exception: he lies and he causes a near adultery, inflicting harm on innocent people. On another interpretation of this passage, Abraham is accused of being guilty of the same misdeed—punishing the innocent—that he sought to prevent God from committing against Sodom.

³⁰ That Abraham is himself welcoming of strangers is no reason for him to expect that most people are like him. His general suspicion would be supported by his experience in Egypt; and the reader who recalls the story of the strangers who come to Lot in Sodom should share his wariness (Genesis 19; see our Chapter 11).

³¹ I owe this last observation to Rachel Airmet.

later forbidden (see, for example, Leviticus 18:9 and 20:17) may assume, wrongly, that sister and wife are here mutually exclusive categories, and that Abraham had explicitly denied that Sarah was his wife when he announced that she was his sister. But as we shall soon see, that is not the case, for Abimelech finds perfectly acceptable the fact that Sarah is both sister and wife. Abraham's lie consists not in what he said, but in what he did not say: he stated only half the truth and concealed the crucial other half.

Abraham concludes his apologia before Abimelech:

“And it came to pass when the gods [*or* God: *‘elohim*] caused [the verb is plural] me to wander from my father's house, that I said unto her: ‘This is the kindness which thou shalt show unto me; at every place³² whither we shall come, say of me: He is my brother.’” (20:13)

Abimelech, unimpressed with this defense, does not answer Abraham's speech with words but with deeds, deeds that demonstrate his (perhaps now god-fearing) superior understanding of marriage and the respect owed to a wife. He compensates Abraham with gifts (sheep, oxen, menservants, and maidservants), “restores him Sarah, his wife” (20:14), and graciously allows him to dwell in the land where he pleases. But his choice speech he reserves for Sarah:

“Behold, I have given *thy brother* a thousand pieces of silver; behold, it is for thee *a covering of the eyes* to all that are with thee; and before all men thou art righted.” (20:16; emphasis added)

Abimelech, a virtuous and magnanimous man, understands that Sarah has been shamed and compromised, even if with her consent. The gift of a thousand pieces of silver is intended to clear her name of all wrongdoing and impurity and to restore her reputation as a chaste and faithful wife. As “a covering of her eyes” it restores to Sarah a veil of modesty and a sign of wifely chastity; it also prevents others from looking at what had taken place, sparing her any humiliation or disgrace; in short, it vindicates her completely. Just as Shem and Japheth, covering Noah's nakedness, restored his social status as their father, so Abimelech, covering Sarah's eyes, restores Sarah's reputation and status as Abraham's wife—not just for his fellow Gerarites, but also for Abraham himself. Her eyes now metaphorically veiled to *all* that are with her, Abraham too must see her solely as his wife and recognize his own guilt in having “unwived” her. In the noblest touch of all, in speaking with Sarah, Abimelech—though he has restored her to Abraham as “*his wife*”—still plays along with the designation of Abraham as her *brother*; Abimelech spares Sarah the shame of knowing that he knows that her husband has unwived her.

Abimelech's deed in defense of marital fidelity finds its fitting response in a newly chastened Abraham. Astonished by Abimelech's delicate and noble response and by his obvious regard for Sarah *as Abraham's wife*, Abraham turns to prayer. Abraham prays to God—for the first and only time in Genesis! What he prayed for we do not know, but the act itself indicates Abraham's returning

³² As far as the reader knows, this request Abraham made only once before, and it was specific for the danger that lurked in Egypt (12:11-13); Abraham did not say “at every place.” Yuval Levin (in a personal communication) remarks: “Abraham seems to suggest, even if he does not himself recognize it, that once such an arrangement is established it has a permanent effect on the relationship of husband and wife. If he was able to think of her as sister once, then he is not easily able to think of her as wife, at least until he comes to realize his error. There is no doing such a thing just once; it has a permanent impact.”

to God (for the first time since the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah) and a tacit admission of having sinned. God responds by healing Abimelech, his wife, and his maidservants, who now all bear children, “for the Lord had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech, because of Sarah, wife of Abraham” (20:18; emphasis added).³³

This time around, thanks to the virtuous Abimelech, who bears moral witness against Abraham and who displays a clear appreciation of the honor due to Sarah as a wife, Abraham is forced to confront the sinfulness of his own conduct. Very likely he sees what the reader is told, in so many words: that God insists on the dignity and honor of the woman as wife; and that the blessings of fertility and progeny—the promised great nation of innumerable descendants—depend upon man’s proper regard for the status of wife and the meaning of marriage, informed by the call to transmit a righteous and holy way.³⁴ Up until now, marriage (or rather women) had been regarded as important to the divine promise only instrumentally, as a source of sons. Now it becomes clear that marriage and the household must be informed by and devoted to the transmission of the covenant and the perpetuation of its ways.

Sarah as Wife

The time is now ripe for the long-promised birth of Abraham’s true heir, to Sarah, which happens in the immediate sequel:

The Lord *took note of* [or remembered or visited] Sarah as He had said, and the Lord *did for Sarah* as He had spoken. And Sarah *conceived and bore* to Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken. And Abraham called the name of his son that was born unto

³³ God’s “political strategy” in this episode deserves brief comment. He first tells Abimelech that Abraham is a prophet who will intervene for him and his people. But Abimelech serves as God’s prophet to teach Abraham that adultery is a sin and that it stains an entire people. Abraham, seeing his own misdeed, prays (for his one and only time) in an act of contrition (*teshuvah*). When God then heals Abimelech’s people, Abimelech must conclude that Abraham is indeed a prophet and of a mighty God. This recognition makes possible the covenant that Abraham and Abimelech will enact in their next encounter (21:22-34). The story shows both how outsiders sometimes help the patriarchs to learn about their God and how, in turn, the patriarchs’ relation to God can become a moral blessing to other peoples.

³⁴ Commenting on the phrase “for the Lord had shut fast every womb,” Robert Alter insightfully observes:

It is noteworthy that only in this version of the sister-wife story is the motif of infertility introduced. Its presence nicely aligns the Abimelech episode with what precedes and what follows. That is, first we have the implausible promise of a son to the aged Sarah; then a whole people is wiped out [LRK: Sodom and Gomorrah, most likely for sexual perversity]; then the desperate [LRK: incestuous] act of procreation by Lot’s daughters in a world seemingly emptied of men; and now an entire kingdom blighted with an interruption of procreation. The very next words of the story—one must remember that there were no chapter breaks in the original Hebrew text, for both chapter and verse divisions were introduced only in the late Middle Ages—are the fulfillment of the promise of progeny to Sarah: “And the Lord singled out Sarah as He had said.”

Alter sees much of the sequence that we treat as Abraham’s education in sex and marriage, but he does not explicitly treat the episodes pedagogically. He therefore does not see how this final wife-sister episode with Abimelech finally prepares both Abraham and Sarah for the birth of the son of the covenant.

him, *whom Sarah bore to him*, Isaac [*yitschak*: he laughs or he will laugh]. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. (21:1-4; emphasis added)

Twenty-five years after he received God's call, the first concrete evidence of the veracity of God's promise is finally provided: Abraham receives the right son and heir, whose rightfulness as heir consists entirely in the fact that he is born to Abraham's wife, as promised. God shows His fidelity to Abraham by showing His fidelity to Sarah: the Lord remembered Sarah; the Lord did for Sarah. From her first troubles in Egypt, the Lord has protected Sarah as Abraham's wife; now He makes clear the reason for His solicitude by making her a mother of the son of the covenant. By becoming the proper mother of his proper heir, Sarah at last becomes Abraham's wife, fully and unambiguously.

Sarah's barrenness and the couple's childlessness were, in fact, evidence that she was not yet, in the strict sense, Abraham's wife. Both her childless condition and his behavior toward her in Egypt and in Gerar attest to their "less than married" condition. Only when Abraham acknowledges that a wife is something absolutely other than a sister does Sarah become pregnant; and only then is she a wife in the full sense.

God has remembered Sarah, but Abraham remembers God and the covenant. He names his son Yitzchak, "He Laughs," "He Will Laugh"—a joyous yet permanently embarrassing reminder both of his and Sarah's earlier lack of trust and also of the fact that God has had the last laugh. And he circumcises Isaac as God had commanded him, committing his son to the binding covenant God had proposed with the people of the new way. Sarah, too, acknowledges her indebtedness to the divine: "Laughter [*ts'chok*] hath God made me; everyone that heareth will laugh [*yitschak*] on account of [or with or at] me" (21:6).³⁵

But Abraham's household is not yet well ordered, and Sarah still has important wifely work to do. A few years later, when Isaac was weaned, Abraham made a great feast for all to celebrate. But Sarah "saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne unto Abraham, making sport [or mocking: *metsachek*]" (21:9). Immediately perceiving a threat to her son,³⁶ she insists that Abraham take appropriate action:

³⁵ Robert Alter comments: "The ambiguity of both the noun *ts'chok* (laughter') and the accompanying preposition *li* ('to' or 'for' or 'with' or 'at me') is wonderfully suited to the complexity of the moment. It may be laughter, triumphant joy, that Sarah experiences and that is the name of the child Isaac ('he-who-laughs'). But in her very exultation, she could well feel the absurdity...of a nonagenarian becoming a mother. *Ts'chok* also means "mockery," and perhaps God is doing something to her as well as for her....All who hear of it may laugh, rejoice, with Sarah, but the hint that they might also laugh at her is evident in her language." The ambiguity of "laughing with" and "laughing at" precisely anticipates the sequel.

³⁶ The precise nature of this threat is uncertain. The verb translated "making sport," *metsachek*, from the same root as "laughing," elsewhere would be best translated as "ridiculing," "joking," or "playing": making fun of or mocking Isaac would, on this reading, be Ishmael's perceived offense. The word can also mean "engaging in sexual play"; accordingly, some interpreters, in order to explain Sarah's strong reaction and harsh response, have suggested that Ishmael was engaging in homosexual play, perhaps even with Isaac. As a third interpretation, Robert Alter, noting that Isaac's name is inscribed in this crucial verb, suggests that Sarah sees that Ishmael is "Isaac-ing it," that is, playing the role of Isaac and presuming to be the legitimate heir. As is so often the case, the uncertainty of the precise meaning of this particular deed is a pedagogical blessing: it compels the reader to think about just what ought to outrage a mother on behalf of her child and how she should go about protecting him.

“Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac.” (21:10)

When Sarah last had trouble with Hagar, Abraham had sided with her but had turned the problem over to her to solve on her own. This time she insists that he take the corrective action—partly because Abraham’s other son is involved, partly to get him to choose between her son and the Egyptian’s, between the son promised them by God and the son gotten by his (their) own resources. Even if she is acting simply out of jealous love for her own, Sarah intuits that the proper ordering of their household for the fulfillment of their parental task within the covenant requires the banishment of Hagar the Egyptian and her son, Ishmael.

Abraham, notwithstanding the miracle of Isaac’s birth, is still attached to his firstborn, his as-it-were natural child. The deed Sarah proposes is grievously painful to Abraham “because of his son.” Addressing him in his turmoil, God intervenes on Sarah’s side, though with due regard also for Ishmael:

And God said unto Abraham: “Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman; *in all that Sarah saith unto thee, hearken unto her voice [shema b’kolah]*, for in Isaac shall seed be called to thee. And also of the son of thy bondwoman will I make a nation because he is thy seed.” (21:12-13; emphasis added)

God does not merely tell Abraham what action to take. Using a phrase with ominous echoes (see note 18 above), God tells Abraham to be obedient to his wife—“hearken to the voice of” is an idiom for “obey”—and what’s more, in everything that she says to him. At least when it comes to her children’s welfare, a wife has, and ought to have, authority with her husband. This Abraham learns from the highest authority of all.

Abraham, hearkening now to the joint voice of both God and Sarah, acquiesces and banishes Ishmael and Hagar. He gives up his harem; he accepts the “rule” of his wife; he establishes the right order of his household. In all these ways, he for the first time ratifies by his deeds the meaning of his marriage. Regarding his firstborn, Ishmael, he must trust that God will look after the lad; and we later learn that Ishmael does indeed flourish. But he does so outside of the new way. Although he had been circumcised by his father within the covenant, Ishmael, hearkening to his own mother, becomes lost to God’s new way. In the last we hear of Ishmael (until he and Isaac together come to bury Abraham), his mother takes for him a wife out of the land of Egypt (21:21). In this allegedly patriarchal text, the maternal influence is hardly slighted. Women matter. And good wives matter most.³⁷

Wife, or Sister? The Meaning of Marriage

It is time to pull together some threads and to venture some generalizations about what Abraham—and what we—have learned on the subject of marriage. Three times we have Abraham

³⁷ Judaism has always considered a child’s mother to be the key determinant of the child’s Jewish identity, and not simply because only the child’s mother can be known with certainty. Judaism recognizes the crucial importance of the maternal influence in child-rearing. Even in the Bible, whereas tribal affiliation and priestly status are determined patrilineally, membership in the nation of Israel is determined by the ethno-religious identity of the mother. The right mother makes a world of difference.

and Sarah involved in adventures that confound the meaning of “wife”—twice with “sister,” once with the Egyptian slavegirl or concubine. That Sarah is in fact Abraham’s half sister as well as his wife is the clue to the deeper meaning of these adventures. So long as he is willing to treat her as a sister—which he does several times to avoid the consequences of her great beauty—Sarah remains barren. Only when he is prepared to look upon her simply as a wife does she in fact become one in the full and proper sense.

When Abraham and Sarah went to Egypt to escape the famine, Abraham asked Sarah to say that she was his sister so that “my soul may live because of you.” If Sarah appears as his wife, Abraham’s life will be in danger. The perceived threat is, in the first instance, quite literal: the Egyptians may indeed kill him in order to gain the beautiful Sarah. But the connection between denying marriage and avoiding death goes much deeper: admitting to having a wife is tantamount to accepting the fact of one’s own mortality and one’s dependence on woman’s generative and nurturing powers. For as we learn along with (and perhaps even before) Abraham, woman *as wife* means not “one’s own missing flesh,” nor even a beloved because beautiful adornment to one’s self-esteem, but one’s chosen and committed equal partner in generation and transmission, providing for one’s own replacement by making a home that will rear well the next generation. Abraham at the beginning acts as if the promise of becoming a great nation can be realized by himself acting alone; thus preoccupied with his own survival and indifferent to the matter of progeny, he doubly “sacrifices” his wife—first by denying her wifeliness and then by abandoning her to Pharaoh’s harem—symbolically enacting his belief in his own self-sufficiency (or at least his own lack of need for woman).

Years later, now preoccupied with his wish for an heir, Abraham accepts his need for woman but not yet his need for a wife. He sheds his wife again (albeit on her suggestion), this time to use the Egyptian slavegirl as a surrogate womb. It is not enough to say that this was then a customary practice in the ancient Near East; such a practice has an inner meaning that God’s new way rejects. For a woman is not merely a seedbed or even, to speak less luridly, just the creative “mother of all living” (as Adam had put it, thinking only of Eve’s natural power of generation). For these purely natural deeds, any woman will do. But because human procreation means rearing as well as bearing, the naturally loose relations of male and female must be transformed and fixed by the legal or conventional singular relation of husband and wife—that is, by marriage.

This lesson Abraham does not begin to learn until Abimelech, acting under the enlightenment of a divinely sent dream, teaches him the sinfulness of adultery and the need to respect the honor and chastity of his wife. And the lesson is completed only with the wondrous, divinely promised birth of a son within the marriage and with Sarah’s subsequent instruction of her husband, again divinely backed, regarding the long-term well-being of their son, on whom the cultural transmission of the covenant will depend. Lest anyone be in doubt about the importance of these matters for God’s new way, the reader, like Sarah and Abraham, is shown that God Himself supports all three crucial elements of the marital bond: (1) respect for woman’s chastity and marital sexual fidelity, which anticipates (2) the gift of children within the marriage, which makes necessary (3) the right ordering of the household, with the husband endorsing his wife’s devotion to the well-being of their children.³⁸

³⁸ This conclusion, though accurate, will need to be reexamined in the light of the episode of the binding of Isaac (see Chapter 11).

Woman as wife means primarily something very precise: a long-term partner for rearing the next generation, or in other words, for transmitting the way of life that is the spiritual lifeblood of the family and the nation. As the story makes plain, it will not do, from the point of view of rearing and transmission, to sow one's seed in culturally foreign soil, to have as the mother of one's children a woman who follows other gods or none at all. And one certainly cannot found or perpetuate God's new way by Egyptianizing one's descendants or, worse, by adopting Pharaoh's own tyrannical practices, including those with respect to women.

In the Garden of Eden story, God had informed the woman that because she was to bear children, her desire would henceforth be to her husband (as father of her children) and he would rule over her. God was not—we argued in Chapter Three—prescribing but predicting; he was forecasting what would happen naturally between man and woman once the children began to appear. And be that as it may, God was surely not endorsing tyranny of husbands over wives. For the natural way of male dominance does not serve best to secure God's new way of justice and holiness. On the contrary, as we learn from God's interventions in the Abraham story, God intervenes to oppose the uninstructed tendency of men to lord it over their women. God attempts to teach Abraham that his rule in the household is, in fact, tantamount to hearkening to his wife, and to supporting her deep-rooted concern for the next generation.

But if the work of rearing the next generation is best conducted with a spouse who shares one's customs, ways and gods, why exogamy rather than incest? Why would not sister and brother be the marital ideal?³⁹ For both share not only common origin and common blood, but also, more important, common rearing and common mores. We who have lived so long with the taboo against brother-sister incest—a taboo we owe, by the way, to biblical religion and the new way begun with Abraham—take for granted that wife and sister are mutually exclusive categories, so much so that we cannot remember the reasons why this should be so—except perhaps for latter-day scientific arguments about the genetic dangers of in-breeding. We also have forgotten—or are too well brought up to consider—that brother-sister unions may in fact be the more natural and uninstructed way of the human race, as it is among our primate cousins.

Rousseau, a man not shy about such matters, paints a vivid picture of human t generation in the earliest times:

No, there were families, but there were no Nations; there were domestic languages, but there were no popular languages; there were marriages, but there was no love. Each family was self-sufficient and propagated itself from its own stock alone: children of the same parents grew up together and gradually found ways to make themselves intelligible to one another; the distinction between the sexes appeared with age, natural inclinations sufficed to unite them, instinct served in lieu of passion, habit in lieu of predilection, people became man and wife without having ceased to be brother and sister.

Rousseau's account is in fact quite compatible with the anthropology of the early chapters of Genesis, which preserves delicate silence about, say, the wife Cain, and which finally reveals that Abraham took to wife his own half sister. Rousseau, in a note appended to the just-quoted passage, adds this powerful moral (albeit utterly secular) commentary:

³⁹ Brother-sister incestuous marriage was practiced by the Egyptian pharaohs. It was also the way of the Greek gods.

The first men had to marry their sisters. In view of the simplicity of the first morals, this practice continued without prejudice as long as families remained isolated and even after the most ancient peoples had come together; *but the law that abolished it is no less sacred for being by human institution*. Those who view it solely in terms of the bond it established between families fail to see its most important aspect. In view of the intimacy between the sexes that inevitably attends upon domestic life, the moment such a sacred law ceased to speak to the heart and to awe the senses, men would cease to be upright, and the most frightful morals would soon cause the destruction of mankind.

The biblical author, to say the least, shares Rousseau's view of the supreme importance of putting an end to incest. The promulgated law that explicitly forbids the practice, given later in Leviticus, is indeed held to be sacred, not only because it is God-given, but because it is part of the so-called holiness code of the Children of Israel, who are enjoined to be holy as the Lord is holy. But the need for such a law is anticipated already in the stories of Abraham and Sarah, in which there is movement from the original sister-become-wife to wife-who-is-also-sister to simply wife. Abraham is led from the natural toward the marital and legal, from an outlook that says that "incest is best" or that "any woman will do" to an outlook that makes instituted exogamous marriage the sacred norm. Let me exaggerate to make the point: Abraham is so to speak "given" a wife who is also his sister in order to educate him—and the reader—in the crucial difference between wife and sister and to lead him—and us—to embrace with understanding the singular meaning of woman as wife.⁴⁰

It remains only to attempt to specify just why this difference is so important. There are, of course, likely psychological and social difficulties with brother-sister sexuality and marriage, especially if there are more than two children. Sex between siblings contaminates the sibling relation with the exclusive and dyadic attempt to fuse two lives in a merger that denies the meaning of siblinghood. To take a brother as a husband is as much an act of metaphorical fratricide as it is an act of metaphorical wife killing to pass a wife off as a sister. Moreover, motives for literal fratricide are also amply provided by brother-sister sex, owing to sexual jealousy.

Deeper than these adverse psychosocial consequences lies the matter of how one stands in the world, whether as a child or as an adult. First, in incestuous unions there is no need to learn the adult restraint of sexual impulse, for with an object of gratification near at hand, instinct spills over into satisfaction: "natural inclination suffice[s] to unite them." More important, in brother-sister

⁴⁰ Careful readers, especially those who are supporters of Natural Law or who hold a more ancient and teleological understanding of nature, may well object to our suggestion that incest is natural, and that God's instruction consists in replacing the way of nature with the way of right (we argued similarly, in Chapter Six, regarding the institution of the Noahide code and covenant). We happily concede the point; indeed, we embrace it. One might say that a proper understanding of the inner procreative meaning of sexuality—and especially of human sexuality—points exactly to the institution of exogamous and monogamous marriage as the institution best suited to rearing decent and upright human children, that is, children who are truly human (or as our text might put it, worthily in God's image). Yet natural sexual impulses will not by themselves establish the proper institutional forms. Moreover, from the point of view of the Bible, many peoples in establishing their sexual mores get them wrong; setting Israel (and humankind) straight on sexual and marital matters will be a crucial part of God's later legislative efforts. For the clearest example, see the law of forbidden (that is, incestuous) unions in Leviticus 18.

marriage, both partners cling as children to the family of origin, in a relation that hearkens back to their common emergence out of the same womb (“flesh of my flesh”), under the protection of the same parents. There is no brave stepping forth unprotected into the full meaning of adulthood, to say permanent good-bye to father and mother and to cleave to your wife, to accept their death and, what is more difficult, to accept your own mortality, the answer to which is not narcissistic sexual gratification but a sober and deliberate saying “yes” to reproduction, transmission and perpetuation. To consciously take a wife from outside the nest is deliberately to establish a family of perpetuation, in at least tacit recognition that human maturity entails both a willingness to die and a desire for renewal and continuity, through birth and cultural transmission—a matter of enormous importance when there is a special way of life to be perpetuated.

Finally, in an incestuous union between brother and sister there is no experience of the other as truly other. There is no distance, no sexual strangeness, no need to overcome fumbling, embarrassment, shame: the inward-looking love of one’s own flesh is naked but it is not ashamed. For this reason, the other is taken for granted and approached in tacit expectation of full compliance with one’s desires; the other is not easily an object of respect. Because of familiarity there is likely to be contempt. There is little possibility of awe (what the Greeks called *aidos*) before the sexual other: awe before the uncanniness of sexual difference, of the radical independence and otherness of the other; awe before the uncanniness of sexual complementarity, of the remarkable possibility of mediating the sexual difference; awe before the mysterious generative power of sexuality, of the wondrous capacity to transcend sexual difference altogether in the creation of a child, who is the parents’ own commingled being externalized in a separate and persisting existence. And because there is no awe before the sexual other, there is less likelihood of awe before the divine Other in whose image created He them, male and female.

It is one of the remarkable features of human existence how things wondrous and awesome become familiar and banal, how we live in the world complacently and self-satisfiedly blind to its marvels. Such sightless trust is in some respects helpful, in some respects harmful, but it is nonetheless eerie how much of our lives is lived within this unknowing familiarity. To a child, his family (if it is a healthy family) is a given, a unity, something that appears to him to be as natural as the rising sun. He does not see, unless and until he goes out to make his own family, how what appears to be a natural “one” is in fact a two-made-to-become-one. He does not discover, save through the practice of exogamy, how the nursery of his own humanity was the product of deliberate human choice, not of blind nature, and the choice of one man and one woman to become husband and wife for precisely this purpose. Finally, only through exogamy is he likely to appreciate the deepest mysteries of being: the possibility of sameness through otherness, of life through death, of the eternal through the everyday. Man’s openness and willing submission to his counterpart properly understood as wife partakes of his openness and willing subordination to the One who is truly other and who inspires us—and commands us—to live knowingly, decently, and gratefully in this astonishing world.