

Introductions to Parashat Lech L'cha (Genesis 12-17)

[REF] The Tanach is so focused on the people of Israel that one can underestimate the overwhelming significance of Genesis 12's opening verses. The first 11 chapters are about the relationship between God and the entire human community. That relationship does not go well, and after 10 generations God decides to destroy the mass and start over with a single virtuous man's family. But choosing a virtuous individual does not guarantee that his descendants will be virtuous, as well. Another 10 generations pass, and humans in general are not a planet-full of Noahs. So once again the focus narrows to a single virtuous person—Abraham.

We must keep in mind what has happened up to this point when we read this, or else we will lose the significance of what is happening here. Wiping out everyone but a virtuous person did not work. So God leaves the species alive, but chooses an individual who will produce a family that will ultimately bring blessing to all the families of the earth. To make sure we get it, it is the final point of God's first revelation to Abraham: Go to the land I'll show you. I'll make you a big nation. I'll bless you. "And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you" (verse 12.3).

To make sure we do not forget it, it is repeated four times—and always in crucial moments of revelation: during the appearance of the three visitors to Abraham (18.17-18); in the blessing following the near-sacrifice of Isaac (22.16-18); in God's first appearance to Isaac (26.2-4); and in Jacob's first encounter with God in the dream of the ladder at Beth-El (28.10-14).

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

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

When he joins in a battle among kings to rescue Lot (Genesis 14), he is drawn into world events, and it is another first step, an anticipation of all the times that his descendants, the people of Israel, will be drawn into contact and interaction with nations. When Abraham covenants with God (Genesis 15 and 17) the ceremony includes specific references to Ur of the Chaldees, the land from which Abraham has come; to Egypt, the land where his descendants will be enslaved; and to 10 peoples of the land that Abraham is promised.

It also includes the announcement of his coming son Isaac, the key to the fulfillment of the destiny to be a blessing to all the families of the earth—as will be confirmed explicitly following the Akedah. And in between the two chapters concerning the Abrahamic covenant comes the story of the birth of Abraham's son Ishmael, whose descendants, the Ishmaelites, will be among Israel's related neighbors.

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

[WGP]

The book of Genesis now moves from myth toward history. Unlike the symbols or legendary standard-bearers of primeval memories and traditions—Adam, and Eve, Shem, and Noah—the spotlight narrows to focus on identifiable persons at a certain time: Abram and Sarai.

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

A degree of settledness is not at all incompatible with their nomadic existence. Cities do attract them, but only because of their character as cultural centers—primarily therefore for reasons of commerce and connubium [legal marriage].

Calling Abram and Sarai "historical" does not mean everything Genesis says about them is history in the accepted sense of the word. But it is not so important to fix their era precisely or to determine which of the stories about them are history and which are legendary. What is important is their role as the ancestors of the nation. While the authors of the Torah were concerned with history as the recounting of facts, it was the meaning of history that was their primary focus, the account of a spiritual message born of the continuing encounter between God and descendants of the first patriarch and matriarch. The Torah does not teach antiquities as such; its purpose is to give religious instruction.

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

THE CALL OF ABRAM (12.1-12.9)

Did God, in fact, speak to Abram and make the promise reported in this chapter? To the biblical age and to believers today, the matter was and is clear: God did speak, and God's relationship to Abram's children and to the land of Canaan was secured by the divine promise. Many interpreters, however, understand God's challenge as something Abram believed he had heard and that consequently acted on in accordance with this belief. Those who cannot accept the possibility of God's communicating directly with us will not be convinced by the biblical or any other report. But they will be able to agree that Abram was indeed impelled by a voice he identified as the voice of God, an instance of "internal" history. Abram acted on his comprehension of the Divine, and his descendants appropriated his experience and made it their own.

THE CHOICE

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

The first view maintains that we cannot know God's reasons, which may appear arbitrary by human standards. Hence the Bible says nothing about Abram's righteousness, though it commented on Noah's. Abram, through no merit of his own, is the vessel, the recipient of God's grace. This reasoning has been favored by Christian interpreters of the Bible, although it has had some Jewish supporters, as well.

The second interpretation says that Abram, like Noah before him, deserved to be chosen. Just as Noah stood out as a uniquely righteous and moral man in his time, Abram possessed and demonstrated qualities that caused God to single him out also. This approach, which has generally been favored by Jewish tradition, pictures Abram from his earliest youth in search of God.

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

THE CHALLENGE

God’s challenge to Abram has a progressive sequence that emphasizes its difficulties. It is difficult to leave one’s land and to be an unprotected wanderer abroad; it is even more difficult to abjure all that is most dear in one’s accustomed house; it is most difficult of all to reject one’s parental values and standards. The passage makes it clear God’s demand represents a severe trial of faith for Abram, the first of several fundamental choices that he will have to make in his life.

BLESSING AND CURSE

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

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

THE PROMISED LAND

We can hardly overemphasize the importance of those biblical passages that state that God gave Canaan to Abram and his descendants forever. From these traditions and memories, amplified by centuries of sacred sentiment, grew a unique relationship between a people and a land. For Abram’s descendants, military acquisition and physical possession—sufficient for all other nations’ claims—were not the core of their relationship to the land. For them, Canaan, Palestine, Zion, Israel, by whatever name it was known, was linked to the will and promise of God, and hence it was a Holy and Promised Land.

This claim was nurtured in thousands of years of possession and loss, presence and absence, reality and memory. To be sure, the people survived without the land and the land without the people—but somehow God and Torah entered into this relationship and gave it a special stamp.

To the Jew, therefore, Zion has been more than a place of pilgrimage or a collection of ancestral sites. It has been both sacred dream and holy potential, the place where God’s kingdom on earth would first emerge. Jews have steadfastly believed it is God’s will that they possess the land and that they possess it in justice for God casts out of this land those who defile it. Only a community of righteousness would match the dreams and prayers centered on this small strip of earth: “Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and the repentant people by righteousness” (Isaiah 1.27).

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

Parashat Lech L'cha (Genesis 12.1-17.27)

Chapter 12

1 The Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you.

[NS] 1. Lech L'cha The story of Abraham opens without an identifying formula or preliminary observation of the type that introduces the Noah narrative. The patriarch bursts upon the scene of history with astounding suddenness. The first 75 years of his life are passed over in total silence. God's call comes in an instant, without forewarning or preparation. It is brief and compelling in its demands, and Abram's immediate response marks the true beginning of his life. The momentous events unfold with startling rapidity, and any introductory embellishment could only have a diminishing effect. The divine silence that persisted for 10 generations is shattered. The voice that first set Creation in motion and that, when last heard by man, brought a message of hope and blessing to the human race (9.8-17) resounds once more. This time it is at Haran, where, for some unexplained reason, the intended migration of Terah and family had come to a halt.

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

[NS] Go forth Hebrew *lech l'cha*. The preposition *l* [ל] gives the verb *h-l-k* [ה-ל-כ], "to walk, go," the sense of "separating, taking leave of." In silent, unwavering obedience to the divine will, "as the Lord had commanded him," the patriarch picks himself up and goes forth, accepting his new destiny in perfect faith.

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

[REF] your land, your birthplace, and your father's house. But he is in Haran. He has already left Ur of the Chaldeans, which was his land and birthplace. This contradiction is a result of the fact that the Torah was composed from several sources. In this case, one of its sources had Abraham coming from Ur, and another had him coming from Haran. Usually, the combination of sources has produced a richer, more complex story in the Torah. But this passage is one of a few instances in which the combination has produced an irreconcilable contradiction. That he has left his birthplace and his father's house is geographically backwards. The point of this order is not geographical. It is emotional. The three steps are arranged in ascending order of difficulty for Abraham. It is hard to leave one's land, harder if it is where one was born, and harder still to leave one's family. And where is he to go? To "the land that I'll show you." That is, he must leave his homeland without knowing for what he is giving it up. The wording seems designed to make it hard for Abraham. This pattern of testing will be repeated when he is commanded to sacrifice Isaac, thus: "Take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac." And where is he to sacrifice him? "On one of the mountains that I'll say to you."

to the land It is unclear whether Abram knew from the outset the identity of the promised land. It is possible he continued the westward migration that his father had interrupted (11.31) and arrived in Canaan unaware that he had reached his goal until so informed by God (12.7). Alternatively, God may have revealed the destination as soon as Abram accepted the call. Either way, God's word transformed the trek into a wholly new venture, now under divine guidance and purpose, completely disengaged from the earlier undertaking. The original segment from Ur to Haran could henceforth be viewed from a different perspective and also be seen as part of God's scheme of history, so that it is possible to speak of God having brought Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans, as in Genesis 15.7 and Nehemiah 9.7, even though the call came in Haran.

Guide to the Translators and Commentators used here

EF: Everett Fox **REF:** Richard Elliott Friedman **RA:** Robert Alter **NS:** Nahum Sarna **CS:** Chaim Stern
SRH: Samson Raphael Hirsch **RASHI:** Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak **OJPS:** Old Jewish Publication Society version
WGP: W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* **TWC:** *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*

2 I will make of you a great nation,
And I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
And you [it—CS] shall be a blessing [and be a blessing—REF].

3 I will bless those who bless you [damn you—RA]
And curse him that curses you;
And all the families of the earth
Shall bless themselves by you.”

[RA] 2. you shall be a blessing. The Israeli biblical scholar Moshe Weinfeld has noted that after the string of curses that begins with Adam and Eve, human history reaches a turning point with Abraham, as blessings instead of curses are emphatically promised.

[REF] 3. shall bless themselves by you. Rashi takes the plain meaning of this phrase to mean that non-Israelites will bless their children with words such as “May you be like Abraham.” If we take the meaning as passive, then it is as I have translated it: “the earth’s families will be blessed through you.” If we take it as reflexive, then it can mean “they will bless themselves through you,” which is Rashi’s understanding; but a reflexive can also mean “they will get blessing through you.” Interpreters are split on this. I believe that context settles the question. The issue in the story until now has been the course of relations between God and all the families of the earth. Now God makes a special bond with Abraham’s family and lets him know that this is for the eventual benefit of all families.

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

(i) I will make of you a great nation That is, great in number and significance. The nature of the promise—that it could not be realized in the lifetime of the recipient because of Sarai’s childlessness and the couple’s advanced age—should all have combined to strain credulity to the breaking point. The magnitude of Abram’s act of faith in accepting the divine word is thus implicit in the narrative.

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

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

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

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

(vi) And curse him that curses you He who mistreats you will inevitably incur misfortune. Because the patriarch will be an unprotected stranger in an alien land, he will have particular need of God’s providential care, and whoever maltreats him will be punished with exceptional severity. It should be noted that the Hebrew has a contrast in number between “those who bless” and “he that curses.” Commentators explain this to mean that Abram’s detractors will be few.

(vii) And all the families of the earth / Shall bless themselves by you Rather, “shall be blessed through—because of—you.” God’s promises to Abram would thus proceed in three stages from the particular to the universal: a blessing on Abram personally, a blessing (or curse) on those with whom he interacts, a blessing on the entire human race. These promises to Abram, given in Haran, make no mention of a gift of land, perhaps so as not to detract from the pure, disinterested act of faith involved in heeding the simple command, “Go forth!”

4 Abram went forth as the Lord had commanded him, and Lot went with him. Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran.

5 Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed, and the persons that they had acquired [bought—RA; accumulated—REF] in Haran; and they set out for the land of Canaan—and they came to the land of Canaan.

6 Abram passed through the land as far as the site [sacred site—CS] of Shechem, at the terebinth [oak—REF, CS] of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land.

[REF] 4. Abram went forth as the Lord had commanded him. Traditionally the emphasis has been on faith as the mark of Abraham's character. But the narrative strongly suggests obedience is meant. Leave your land: "And Abram went." Sacrifice your son: "And Abram got up early." The tests that Abraham undergoes are certainly tests of obedience. At this stage in relations between God and humans, God appears to single out a human who will do what he is told. This will change gradually in the Tanach, as humans grow and mature, and God cedes more responsibility for the world to them. But for now, obedience is sought.

[NS] 5. his brother's son Lot The oldest uncle assumed guardianship of his dead brother's child; see 14.12. **Wealth...persons** These are mentioned in anticipation of the ensuing narrative (verse 16). Abram's affluence does not derive from Pharaoh's gift.

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

[NS] 6. the site of Shechem Hebrew *m'kom Shechem*. This combination of *makom* with the name of a city is unique. Very likely, the term here has the special meaning of "sacred site," like the Arabic *Maqam*. Sacred sites were always desirable stopping places for travelers and pastoral nomads because of their proximity to springs and wells. Nothing here suggests Shechem had any prior sanctity for Abram. Only after receiving a divine revelation does he build an altar there; he does not make use of an existing one. As for why Shechem, it is the true physical center of the country, and one of the important cities in the north central mountain area. From here he could follow the water-parting route that led through the hill country to Shiloh, Bethel, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron, and Beer-sheba. Abram and the other patriarchs, in their pastoral migrations, generally avoided well-inhabited areas in northern Canaan and the coastal plain. They likewise kept away from the Plain of Jezreel and the Jordan Valley. By sticking to the central mountain range and the Negev, they could enjoy a region that was suited to pastoral economy, but was sparsely populated. They could wander with their herds without encroaching on the rights of others. At the same time, they were generally on the fringes of urban centers where they could obtain supplies, if need be, and also dispose of their own products

[RA] The Canaanites were then in the land. The point of the notation is to introduce a certain tension with the immediately following promise that the land will be given to Abram's offspring.

[NS] The Canaanites were then in the land The particle "then" (*az*) has long vexed commentators because it implies that at the time of the Narrator the Canaanites no longer existed, a situation that did not become a reality until long after Joshua's conquest. Ibn Ezra cryptically remarks: "I have a secret explanation, and the man of discretion will keep silent" (*yesh li sod ve-ha-maskil yiddom*). The supercommentary on this passage by Joseph b. Eliezer Bonfils (*Tsafenat Pa'neah*, second half of the 14th century CE) explains Ibn Ezra's comment as follows: "Moses could not possibly have employed the word 'then' for reason demands that the word would have been written at a time when the Canaanite was no longer in the land, and we know the Canaanite departed only after the death of Moses....Consequently, it would appear that Moses did not write this word here (*zeh nir'eh shelo' katav mosheh z'ot ha-millah bekka'n*), but only Joshua or one of the other prophets wrote it." Alternatively, as Rabbi Hezekiah ben Manoah (known as "Chizkuni," 13th cent. CE) noted, the phrase "is written from the perspective of the future" (*al shem he-atid nikhtav*).

7 The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "I will assign this land to your offspring." And he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him.

8 From there he moved on to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and he built there an altar to the Lord and invoked the Lord by name.

9 Then Abram journeyed by stages toward the Negev.

10 There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.

[NS] 7. The Lord appeared This is the first theophany, or divine revelation, introduced by Hebrew *va-yera*, as distinct from divine speech to an individual introduced by *va-yo'mer* (see verse 1). This term, which is characteristic of the Genesis patriarchal narratives, is used three times with Abraham (also 17.1; 18.1), twice with Isaac (26.2, 24), and once with Jacob (55.9). The stem *r-a-h* (ר-א-ה), "to see," belongs to the formal vocabulary of prophecy. An early name for a prophet in Israel was *ro'eh*, "seer" (1 Sam. 9.9). It is quite clear, however, that such a usage need not imply any visual accompaniment to the oral communication.

I will assign this land... This refers back to verse 1, "the land that I will show you." Its identity is now established. More than this, the original promises of nationhood and blessings are now supplemented by the grant of national territory through which those promises may be consummated. This divine declaration, oft repeated, is one of the seminal texts of the Torah. Henceforth, the history and destiny of the Jewish people are inextricably bound up with the promised land. Legal ownership of the land is not the same thing as actual possession. The nation does not exist, and the patriarchs remain wanderers, ever on the move

8. He built an altar there in gratitude for the promise of land.. Among the patriarchs, acts of worship are always individual, never public. The patriarchs do not take part in any existing cult, and they always build new altars or reuse the one they themselves have previously erected. Significantly, we have no record of an act of worship by them outside the boundaries of the Land of Israel, and Abram refrains from putting up an altar inside the land before it has been divinely identified as the land of promise. It is strange that there is no mention made of a sacrifice being offered. Scripture offers no explanation for the attraction of the particular spot or for the reason for building the altar, but it is important enough for Abram to return there on his way back from Egypt (Genesis 13.2–4). Bethel is identified with modern Beitin, which lies about 10.5 miles north of Jerusalem at the junction of the north-south highway with an east-west road. It was the site of an important Canaanite sanctuary to the god El, head of the pantheon, but, as in the case of Shechem, Abram ignores the prior pagan sanctity of the place and builds an altar to his own God Adonai, thus endowing the site with a new religious history.

9. toward the Negev That is, to southern and southeastern Judah around Beer-sheba, below the central hill country and the Shephelah. By now, Abram has covered the entire length of the country from north to south.

10. There was a famine in the land. No sooner does Abram receive the divine blessings than the reality of the present asserts itself. The promises of nationhood and territory seem to be in danger of miscarrying. Famine drives him from the land, and physical peril threatens him and his wife. The theme of peril and reaffirmation of promises is a recurring one throughout Genesis. The primary cause of famine in Canaan would have been prolonged failure of the seasonal rains. Egypt, on the other hand, relied for its rich fertility on the more dependable and predictable rise of the Nile. In reality, though, true famine due to natural causes is not so common in the Bible. The fact, therefore, that each of the patriarchs experiences famine in the land (26.1, 42.1, 43.1) has special significance. In Genesis, the promised land is not "flowing with milk and honey," and the divine promises are not intended to bring quiet and repose to their recipients. The realities of nature and of the human landscape are harsh. Living in the land is difficult, sometimes precarious. All this continually impinged upon the religious consciousness of Israel. It generated a heightened sense of dependence on God's protection and a more intense awareness of His mysterious workings.

[NS] THE KIDNAPPING OF SARAI (vv. 11–20)

Two similar incidents are recorded—in 20.1-18 in relation to Abimelech king of Gerar, and in 26.1, 6-11 in connection with Isaac and Rebekah. Modern critical scholarship assumes the triplet resulted from varying treatments of a single original incident by different sources. It should be noted, however, that the biblical Narrator makes clear Abram anticipated danger of the sort described in this chapter as a recurring factor in the course of his wanderings from the day he left Haran (see Genesis 20.13).

There can be no doubt that very ancient traditions lie behind the present narratives. In the first place, no late writer could have invented the idea that Abraham had married his half-sister (Genesis 20.12). Such a note could not have originated as a late apologetic in mitigation of Abraham's misrepresentation about his relationship to Sarai. To assume otherwise is to believe that, in the consciousness of the biblical Narrator, incest was less offensive than a lie told in self-defense!

Another point is that both Canaanite and Greek epics provide parallels to the motif of the abduction of the hero's beautiful wife. From Ugarit comes the story of King Keret, who mounted a military campaign to recover his lovely Hurrai. From the Greek sphere, there is of course the legend of Helen of Troy, who was twice kidnapped, once in her youth by Theseus and again after she married Menelaus. Her abduction was the cause of the Trojan War. It is reasonable to assume that similar sagas circulated about the matriarchs of Israel. These were collected and incorporated into the patriarchal narratives, but with an entirely different perspective and for purposes totally at variance with their Canaanite-Greek analogues.

As to the purposes that motivated the biblical Narrator, it is the emphasis on God's direct, protective intervention—just at the moment when all human resources have failed and it appears that the divine promises are to be aborted. The matriarch is recovered by the action of God, not as a result of warfare waged by the outraged husband.

[WGP] YOU ARE MY SISTER

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

There is evidence that Sarai was indeed Abram's sister. In the second version of the story, we learn that they shared the same father (Genesis 20.12). It is possible this latter notation reflects a stage of civilization in which descent was traced through the mother, and marriages between offspring of the same father (but not the same mother) were permissible. Hence, according to this assumption, when Abram instructed Sarai to say she was his sister, he based his request on a real relationship.

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

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

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

Jewish teaching has generally held that, even under duress, no man may intentionally kill or commit a sexual crime on an innocent person. The application of this principle often poses agonizing questions that can be decided only within a given context. The text does not tell us whether Sarai was indeed violated, while the parallel tale that involves Abimelech instead of Pharaoh (Gen. 20.4, 6) tells us that nothing untoward happened.

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

11 As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are.

12 If the Egyptians see you, and think, 'She is his wife,' they will kill me and let you live.

13 Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you [because of you—REF, CS]."

14 When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw how very beautiful the woman was.

15 Pharaoh's courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's palace.

[NS] 11. Egypt This episode is the first mention of Egypt as a factor in Israelite history. The narrative prefigures the ambiguity of future relationships—on the one hand as a place of shelter and succor in time of distress, on the other hand as a place of mortal danger. Interestingly, there is no hatred of Egypt in the Bible, despite the slavery and the Exodus. To the contrary, Israel is enjoined: "You shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land" (Deuteronomy 23.8). Notwithstanding repeated prophetic denunciations of Egypt for its duplicity and fickleness in its international relations, Isaiah can envisage a future partnership of Israel and Egypt, and he has God saying: "Blessed be My people Egypt" (Isaiah 19.25).

you are my sister The biblical heroes are not portrayed as demigods or perfect human beings. They are mortals of flesh and blood, subject to the same temptations and possessed of the same frailties as are all other human beings. How is Abram's conduct to be judged? Ramban comments as follows: "Know that our father Abraham inadvertently committed a great sin by placing his virtuous wife in a compromising situation because of his fear of being killed. He should have trusted in God..." As opposed to this critical view, there is the analysis of Radak [Rabbi David Kimchi, 13th Century] that Abram is confronted with a moral dilemma, forced to make a choice between two evils. Whatever may be the shortcomings of this interpretation, the moral problem that faced the patriarch was very real. His decision involved a conflict between human life and human dignity within a hierarchy of values. The condescending view of some modern commentators that it is unfair to judge Abram's behavior by the (supposedly) superior moral standards of today is based on a confusion of chivalry with morality.

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

[NS] sister In the ancient Near East, there was a well-known sociolegal institution of "fratriarchy" that existed over a long period of time. Where there is no father, the brother assumes legal guardianship of his sister, particularly with respect to obligations and responsibilities in arranging marriage on her behalf. Therefore, whoever wished to take Sarai to wife would have to negotiate with her "brother." In this way, Abram could gain time to plan escape. Of course, this went awry when the Egyptian turned out to be Pharaoh himself.

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

16 And because of her, it went well with Abram [he was good to Abram on her account—REF]; he acquired sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels.

17 But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues [severe afflictions—CS] on account of Sarai, the wife of Abram.

[NS] 15. Pharaoh This is the first biblical appearance of this title. His name is not given, nor is that of any other pharaoh, in Genesis or Exodus. The title derives from the Egyptian *per-o*, “the great house,” already a designation of the royal palace as early as ca. 2500 BCE. In New Kingdom times (from the 16th century BCE on), it came to be used for the king, in the same way as “The White House” can designate the American president or “The Crown,” the British monarch.

16. it went well with Abram A *double entendre*. The phrase cannot be separated from its use in verse 13, while it derives its definition from the following clause. Abram was not killed; in fact, he acquired much wealth, the source of which is not explained. Mention of Abram’s wealth and possessions also provides the background for the next incident in his life.

camels The presence of the camel in this and other lists raises a complex problem. The camel appears elsewhere in the patriarchal narratives, but it is not the regular mode of transportation. Its use seems to be restricted to women. Abraham sets out for Mount Moriah on an ass; Simeon and Levi find asses, but not camels, among the loot of Shechem; Joseph’s brothers mount asses to go down to Egypt to buy food; Joseph does not send camels to transport his father from Canaan, and there is no reference to camels among the animals sold to Joseph by the hard-pressed Egyptians in return for food. The camel is conspicuously absent from the published Mari texts. Thousands of commercial and administrative texts from the Old Babylonian Period (ca. 1950–1530 BCE) maintain complete silence on its existence. All evidence points to the effective domestication of the camel in the 12th century BCE, long after the patriarchal period.

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

A solution to the problem may perhaps be sought along other lines. Certain bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian lexical texts from Mesopotamia equate a domesticated animal called “a donkey-of-the-sea-land” with a dromedary, thus proving a knowledge of the latter in southern Mesopotamia in Old Babylonian times (ca. 2000–1700 BCE). Moreover, the scribes knew to differentiate between the dromedary and the Bactrian camel, and a Sumerian text from that period mentions the drinking of camel’s milk.

The original habitat of the camel seems to have been Arabia. It is likely that the domesticated camel at first spread very slowly and long remained a rarity. A wealthy man might acquire a few as a prestige symbol for ornamental rather than utilitarian purposes. This would explain their presence in Abraham’s entourage, their nonuse as beasts of burden, and their special mention in situations where wealth and honor need to be displayed, as, for instance, in Genesis 24.

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

[NS] plagues. There seems to be a word play behind the Hebrew expression, for the stem *n-g-a* (נ-ג-א) can mean “to afflict, plague,” as well as “to come into physical contact with, to harass sexually.”

18 Pharaoh sent for Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me! Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?"

19 Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her as my wife? Now, here is your wife; take her and begone [get out—RA]!"

20 And Pharaoh put men in charge of him, and they sent him off [drove him away—CS] with his wife and all that he possessed.

Chapter 13

1 From Egypt, Abram went up into the Negev, with his wife and all that he possessed, together with Lot.

2 Now Abram was very rich in cattle, silver, and gold. [was very heavy—REF; heavily laden—RA]

3 And he proceeded by stages from the Negev as far as Beth El, to the place where his tent had been formerly, between Beth El and Ai,

4 the site of the altar that he had built there at first; and there Abram invoked the Lord by name.

5 Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents,

6 so that the land could not support them staying together; for their possessions were so great that they could not remain together.

7 And there was quarreling between the herdsmen of Abram's cattle and those of Lot's cattle—the Canaanites and Perizzites were then dwelling in the land.

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

CHAPTER 13

5. Lot... also had He constitutes an independent unit, a subgroup within the clan. His wealth is restricted to cattle and camp.

7. between the herdsmen Abram takes action while the discord is still in its initial stage at the lower level and before it can sour relationships between the principals.

[RA] The Canaanites and the Perizzites This second notation of the indigenous population of Canaan, at the moment of friction between the two immigrants from Mesopotamia, suggests that they can scarcely afford such divisiveness when they are surrounded by potential enemies. There may also be a hint of irony in their dividing up a land here that already has inhabitants.

[NS] The Canaanites and Perizzites This sheds light on the background of the discord. The natural resources sufficed to sustain two small clans, but there was an additional exacerbating factor—the area already had a settled population. Strife between pastoral nomads endangers their symbiotic relationship with the local agricultural-urban communities. That explains why both Abram and Lot have to leave the region.

Perizzites This name is also paired with the Canaanites in 34.30 and in Judges 1.4- 5. Because Hebrew *perazi* here means "a hamlet dweller," as opposed to the inhabitant of a walled city, as in Deuteronomy 3.5, "Canaanites and Perizzites" in these passages may refer, respectively, to those who dwell in walled cities and in open country. However, the Perizzites are otherwise always featured in ethnic lists as the name of a minor pre-Israelite population group. Nothing is known of them from extrabiblical sources.

8 Abram said to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me, between my herdsmen and yours, for we are kinsmen.

9 Is not the whole land before you? Let us separate [lit. "Please separate from me]: if you go north, I will go south; and if you go south, I will go north."

10 Lot looked about him and saw how well watered was the whole plain of the Jordan, all of it—this was before the Lord had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah—all the way to Zoar, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt. [[it was] like a divine Garden, like the land of Egypt as you get to Zoar—CS]

11 So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward. Thus, they parted from each other;

12 Abram remained in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled in the cities of the Plain, pitching his tents near Sodom.

[RA] 8-9 This is only the second report of direct speech of Abram. The first, as he is about to enter Egypt, reveals a man fearful about his own survival. Here we get a very different image of Abram as the reasonable peacemaker and as a man conscious of family bonds in alien surroundings.

[NS] Abram displays great nobility of character. Although the older man, the uncle, and apparently the erstwhile guardian, he does not insist on seniority or priority of rights. Peace-loving and magnanimous, he selflessly offers his nephew first choice of grazing land and watering places.

strife Hebrew *m'rivah*. All other usages of *m'rivah* in biblical Hebrew refer exclusively to the controversies and grumbings of the people against their leader and against God over the lack of water during the wilderness wanderings. Hence, there may well be a verbal subtlety here that not only explicates the prime cause of the quarrels, but also contains the submerged judgment of base ingratitude on the part of Lot.

[RA] 9. Pray, let us part The Hebrew is cast in the form of a polite imperative, literally: "Kindly part from me."

[NS] 9. north... south Literally, "left... right," that is, from the viewpoint of one facing the rising sun.

10. looked about him Bethel is situated on a hill 2,886 feet above sea level. Less than one mile to the southeast is an elevation that affords a magnificent view of the Jordan Valley.

well watered That is, fed by streams and brooks and therefore independent of seasonal rainfall for its fertility.

plain of the Jordan Hebrew *kikkar*. It is uncertain which part of the Jordan Valley is the *kikkar*.

this was before A parenthetical note to explain the obvious contrast between the later harsh reality and this lush description. There is also hidden irony here, for Lot's presumptuous cupidity turns out to be ruinous for him in the long run.

all the way to Zoar This refers back to the first clause. From 19.20- 22 it appears that Zoar marked the southern limit of the "plain" (*kikkar*). On the southeast shore of the Dead Sea lies a city of that name with a continuously recorded history of occupation throughout the First and Second Temple periods, the talmudic and Byzantine epochs, and down to the Crusades.

11. So Lot chose for himself He does not defer to Abram, but selfishly selects the most attractive prospect.

12. in the land of Canaan This indicates a tradition that the "cities of the Plain" lay outside the borders of Canaan. To what period this applies is unknown, but verses 14-15 below revise this situation.

[RA] dwelled in the cities ... set up his tent At least in this first phase of his habitation of the plain, Lot is represented ambiguously either living in a town or camping near one. From the writer's perspective, abandoning the semi-nomadic life for urban existence can only spell trouble. The verb 'ahal derived from the noun "tent" is relatively rare, and seems to mean both to set up a tent and (verse 15) to fold up a tent in preparation for moving on.

13 Now the inhabitants of Sodom were very wicked sinners against the Lord.

14 And the Lord said to Abram, after Lot had parted from him, "Raise your eyes and look out from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west,

15 for I give all the land that you see to you and your offspring forever.

16 I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, then your offspring too can be counted.

17 Up, walk about the land, through its length and its breadth, for I give it to you."

[NS] 13. very wicked sinners Another parenthetical note that prepares the reader for the events of chapter 19. Here it offers the reason for the forthcoming destruction, referred to in verse 10, and carries with it a judgment on Lot's character. Dazzled by the surface appearance of prosperity, he pays no heed to the moral depravity of his future neighbors.

14. after Lot had parted The preposition "after" (Hebrew *acharei*) has a causal as well as temporal function here. There is a direct connection between Lot's departure and the blessings. Abram's last link with his father's house is now severed, and a fresh stage in his life begins. The blessings are exclusively invested in the patriarch and his direct lineal descendants; the future national territory will include the area in which Lot settles. The wickedness of the Sodomites typifies the general unworthiness of the prior inhabitants and provides the moral rationalization for God's actions in depriving them of the land.

Raise your eyes and look The same Hebrew expression is behind Lot's action in verse 10. Lot "raised his eyes" but saw only the region of Sodom; Abram "raised his eyes" and viewed the entire land. Genesis 21.8-10 has Abram moving to Ramath-Hazor, which is almost certainly Gebel-el-Asur, 5 miles northeast of Bethel, the highest spot in central Israel (3,291 ft.). The Mediterranean, the hills of Hebron, and even Transjordan can be seen from there.

15. to you and your offspring Abram is included this time, even though it is seemingly inappropriate since he, personally, cannot take possession. The language simply follows the legal formulas used in Near Eastern royal land grant documents.

forever The land is given by God to Israel unconditionally and in perpetuity. As Radak says, "Even though Israel will go into exile, it is destined to return." Henceforth, there exists an inextricable bond between Israel and the land, a bond powerful enough to defy thousands of years of exile.

[RA] 16. the dust of the earth Unusually for the use of simile in the Bible, the meaning of the simile is spelled out after the image is introduced. Perhaps this reflects the high didactic solemnity of the moment of promise, though the comparison with dust might also raise negative associations that would have to be excluded. (The great Yiddish poet Yakov Glatstein wrote a bitter poem after the Nazi genocide which proposes that indeed the seed of Abraham has become like the dust of the earth.)

[NS] the dust of the earth Parallel texts use the similes of the stars and the sand of the sea to the same effect, but "dust" is more suited to the context of the four directions.

[RA] 17. walk about the land Walking around the perimeter of a piece of property was a common legal ritual in the ancient Near East for taking final possession, and the formula "I have given it to So-and-so and to his sons forever" is a well-attested legal formula in the region for conveyance of property going back as far as the Ugaritic texts, composed in the 14th and 13th centuries BCE.

[NS] walk about the land Early Jewish exegesis (Targum Yonatan) understood this traversing of the length and breadth of the land to be a symbolic act constituting a mode of legal acquisition termed *chazakah* in rabbinic Hebrew. The validity of the formality is discussed in tannaitic sources in connection with this passage.

18 And Abram moved his tent, and came to dwell at the terebinths of Mamre, which are in Hebron; and he built an altar there to the Lord. [oaks of Mamre—REF, CS]

18 Mamre The origin of this name is unknown. It seems to be non-Semitic and does not appear outside Genesis. According to Genesis 14.13, 24, Mamre was a distinguished personage allied to Abram. In 23.19, Mamre is another name for the city of Hebron. Apparently, one of the ancient families there and owner of a wood outside the city, Mamre gave his name to the city or at least to one of its important quarters.

Hebron A strategically placed city in the Judean heartland, lying alongside the north-south water-parting route [a ridge of land that separates two adjacent river systems] about midway between Jerusalem to the north and Beer-sheba to the south. Situated about 3,050 feet above sea level, it is surrounded by an extremely fertile countryside, mentioned in Numbers 13.23.

According to Numbers 13.22, the city was founded seven years before Tanis in the Nile Delta. This would give a date of ca. 1737 BCE since there is a stela from ca. 1330 BCE commemorating the 400th anniversary of the founding of Tanis. The biblical reference must be to the establishment of Hebron as a fortified administrative center, for there is evidence of a settlement on the site as early as the third millennium BCE.

The origin of the name is in dispute. It has been connected with the Hebrew stem *ch-b-r* (ח-ב-ר) “to unite,” signifying a confederacy of four separate settlements; hence its other name, Kiryat-arba, “city of four,” in Genesis 23.2 and 35.27. Another theory derives it from a Semitic word meaning “a storehouse, granary.” The modern Arabic name for the city is al-Chalil, which is short for al-Chalil er-Rachman, “friend of the Merciful One.” This is a reference to Abraham, who has the title “friend of God” in Isaiah 41.8 and 2 Chronicles 20.7, as well as in some extra-biblical early Jewish sources. The Arabic name may result from word play, popularly connecting Hebron (חברון) with chaver (חבר) “friend.”

Hebron has occupied a place of extraordinary importance in Jewish tradition as one of the four holy cities along with Jerusalem, Safed, and Tiberias. It was the first city in which the patriarch Abraham settled, the first in which he bought land, and the burial site of the three patriarchs and their wives, in the Cave of Machpelah. For seven years, it was the first capital of Judah and Israel under King David, as told in 2 Samuel 2.1- 4 and 5.1- 5. 14 he built an altar there The third erected by Abram.

Introduction to Chapter 14: Abram’s world at war

[RA] Scholarship is virtually unanimous in identifying this chapter as the product of a different literary source from the three principal strands out of which Genesis is woven.

The whole episode, in fact, is a prime instance of the technique of literary collage that is characteristic of biblical narrative. Abram, having been promised national tenure in the land in the immediately preceding episode is now placed at the center of a different kind of narrative that makes him a figure on the international historical scene, doing battle with monarchs from the far-flung corners of Mesopotamia and treating with the king of Jerusalem (Salem), one of the principal cities of Canaan.

The dating of the narrative is in dispute, but there are good arguments for its relative antiquity: at least four of the five invading kings have authentic Akkadian, Elamite, or Hittite names; and the repeated glossing of place-names (“Bela, that is, Zoar”) suggests an old document that invoked certain names which usage had replaced by the time this text was woven into the larger Abraham narrative.

The War of the Kings

Nahum Sarna, in "Understanding Genesis"

One of the most unusual of the patriarchal stories, and at the same time one of the most perplexing, is that relating the "battle of the kings."

Five Canaanite kings had been paying allegiance for 12 years to Chedorlaomer, ruler of Elam. When they finally decided to assert their independence, a coalition of four eastern monarchs organized a punitive expedition against them. Carried out on a grand scale, the invasion succeeded in routing the rebels. Among the casualties of the city of Sodom was Lot, Abraham's nephew, who was taken prisoner together with his family and possessions. As soon as Abraham received the news, he mustered his 318 retainers and set off in hot pursuit of the invaders. In a night encounter Abraham defeated them north of Damascus, rescued the captives and retrieved the loot.

On his victorious return home, the patriarch received the blessing of Melchizedek, King of Salem, to whom he paid tithes. He also turned down an offer to share personally in the spoils of war.

This narrative does not, at first glance, seem to be organically related to either the preceding or subsequent events in the life of Abraham. It has a literary, annalistic style all its own. It is replete with detailed information of a geographic and ethnic nature. It is the only chapter in the Book of Genesis that connects a patriarch with great historic events that bring him out onto the international stage. The nature of the subjection of Canaanite kings to a distant monarch and the exact form which their rebellion took is not stated. Equally uncertain is whether the suppression of the revolt was the sole objective of the eastern coalition or whether it was part of a larger enterprise. The tone of the story is more secular than religious, the latter note appearing only toward the end. The *dramatis personae* are not otherwise attested, and some of the place-names are unknown. The account has no parallel in Near Eastern records and cannot therefore be easily fitted into the framework of history. Finally, the image of Abraham as a military chief and hero is remarkable and unique.

Its antiquity

It is now recognized that this entire account is based upon a document of great antiquity. [William Albright actually puts it "no later" than sometime in the second millennium BCE, meaning that it may even have been a contemporaneous document or one written not too long after the actual events. The assumption is this document was written in Akkadian and that portions of it were translated into Hebrew for inclusion here.—Shammai.] The prose style has preserved indications of an archaic substratum in verse form. For instance, the names of the Canaanite Kings are arranged in two alliterative pairs, Bera-Birsha and Shinab-Sherneber. The language contains some unique or very rare words and phrases. One such, *hanikh* (v. 14), most likely meaning "an armed-retainer," appears but this once in the Bible, but is found in the Egyptian execration texts of the 19th-18th centuries BCE and in a 15th-century BCE cuneiform inscription from Taanach, Israel.

It will be noticed that only four of the local monarchs are mentioned by name, the fifth being called simply, "the king of Bela" (verse 2). Had the whole episode no historical foundation, the writer would surely not have been at a loss for a name. The ancient source behind the biblical account must no longer have preserved the information and Scripture adhered faithfully to it.

The names of the Eastern kings likewise have about them an air of verisimilitude. While they cannot be connected with any known historic personages, three of the four can certainly be associated with the early Near Eastern onomasticon. Arioch now has its counterpart in the name Arriwuk, also found in the Nuzi documents as Ar-ri-uk-ki. Chedorlaomer contains two elements, each of which is known separately from Elamite sources. The first [*kudur*] means "servant" and the

second [*Lagamar*] is [a reference to] the name of a deity [taken together, Kudur-Lagamar means “servant of Lagamaru”; as for that “g,” it actually appears in the Hebrew, because the letter ayin actually has a semi-hard guttural g sound which long ago got lost in pronunciation and, I guess, transliteration—Shammai]. Tidal is a northwest Semitic transcription of the Hittite royal name Tudhalias.

The wealth of geographical detail is particularly illuminating. The scene of the decisive military invasion is described as "the Valley of Siddim, now the Dead Sea." In other words, we are told the valley no longer existed at that time the story achieved its final literary form, for the waters of the Dead Sea had by then encroached upon the once flourishing area; but the original name was carefully reproduced. This tendency to preserve the ancient toponyms, while at the same time supplementing them with the place-names used in later times, is meticulously applied throughout. Sometimes the additional name served to identify the location for the Israelite reader no longer familiar with the site. Typical in this respect are the notations, "El-paran which is by the wilderness" (verse 6), "En-mishpat which is Kadesh" (v. 7), "the Valley of Shaveh which is the Valley of the King" (verse 17).

In addition, there are three sets of double place-names, Ashteroth-Karnaim, Shaveh-Kiriathaim and Hazazon-Tamar. In each case, the second name is known to us from Israelite times. In the case of Ashteroth-Karnaim, they were separate, but closely neighboring cities, the second flourishing after the decline of the first. We may assume also that in each of the other pairs, the first name represents the archaic pre-Israelite designation strange to later generations. In the case of Dan (verse 14), a town representing the northern extremity of the Land of Israel, only the later, Israelite, name is anachronistically given, the earlier Laish having, for some reason, been here omitted.

The list of defeated peoples, like the inventory of cities, bears all the hallmarks of having been based on a chronicle of great antiquity. Rephaim is an ethnic term generally designating the very early pre-Israelite inhabitants of the land. By the time of Moses, they had all but disappeared and had been endowed in the popular imagination with the attributes of aboriginal giants. The Emim were the earliest settlers in the land of Moab and the Horites of Mt. Seir were dispossessed by the Edomites in the 13th century BCE; yet the text does not anachronistically refer to either Moab or Edom. The Zuzim are otherwise unknown, but may be identical with the Zamzumim. Only the Amalekites and Amorites were still extant at the time of the Israelite occupation.

The invasion route

The invasion route followed by the eastern kings is of considerable interest. Its topographic soundness has been effectively demonstrated in the light of extensive archaeological surveys. We do not know the identity of the places of origin of the invaders except for Elam, the territory lying north of the Persian Gulf, west of the Tigris River in modern Iran. Shinar is here undoubtedly Babylonia, the area containing ancient Sumer and Akkad. Ellasar may possibly be the royal city of Ila(n)zura, situated East of the Euphrates and mentioned in the Mari texts. Goiim is totally unknown and may perhaps be simply the usual Hebrew word for "nations," indicating that the name of the hometown of King Tidal was lost. However, once the coalition of kings reached the west, we can trace fairly accurately their destructive path, even though a precise identification of some of the place-names is not yet possible.

The invaders traversed the entire length of the country east of the Jordan from north to south. From Karnaim in Bashan they passed on to Ham in north Gilead down through the Plains of Moab and continued across the hill-country of Edom to Elath on the Gulf of Akaba. They then turned northwest crossing the Negev to Kadesh-Barnea. From here they made another abrupt turn, this time to the northeast towards the Valley of Siddim in the area now a lagoon south of the Lisan of the Dead Sea. In this valley they fought a decisive battle routing the five kings of the cities of the Plain.

This route coincides with the King's Highway, the international road running in practically a continuous straight line from north to south in Transjordan, which served as the ancient caravan route bearing the products of the south Arabian lands to the Red Sea. If our story of the invasion is factual, it would mean that several highly developed areas of permanent sedentary occupation must have existed in early times along the route followed. Extensive archaeological surveys of Transjordan and the Negev have indeed shown this to have been the case during what is known as the Middle Bronze I period, i.e., between the 21st and 19th centuries BCE. A civilization of a high order of achievement flourished throughout this period, and a truly amazing number of settlements has been discovered. Strangely enough, there occurs a complete and sudden interruption in settled life in Transjordan and the Negev just at the end of the period, apparently as a result of some historic catastrophic invasion that systematically wiped out everything in its path. For the next 600 years, Transjordan remained desolate until the founding of the Kingdoms of Edom and Moab in the 13th century BCE. In the Negev, the break in civilization lasted nearly a thousand years.

In the light of all this, it is not unreasonable to assume that the story of the battle of the Kings in the Book of Genesis preserves an authentic echo of a great military expedition which put an end to the Middle Bronze I settlements [emphasis Shammai]. The annals recording the catastrophic events may well have furnished the basis for the biblical account.

Abram the Hebrew

The attentive reader will have observed that up to this point Abraham remains wholly detached from the course of events. In fact, the 24-verse chapter is almost exactly divided between the account of the invasion and the story of Abraham's intervention. The isolation of the patriarch fits in with the picture of the fathers as strangers and wanderers in the land. So long as Abraham was outside the path of hostilities [as Hebron, where he then resided, surely was—Shammai], he was not likely to become involved. The capture of Lot, however, altered the complexion of the entire episode as far as he was concerned, and it is this development that rescued the account of the invasion from oblivion.

Our narrative provides a perfect example of biblical historiosophy. The aim is not the simple narrative of historic events, but their use to illuminate and illustrate the biblical understanding and interpretation of the historical process. With the intervention of Abraham, the secular annalistic nature of the account changes abruptly and the intertwining of the events of the ancient military chronicle with the life of the patriarch transforms the secular record into a religious document.

Abraham assumes a central role in the second part of the story. He and his mere 318 retainers put to flight the victorious armies of the four powerful kings. True, he has two Amorite allies, Eshkol and Aner, as well as Mamre, but so thoroughly obscured is their part in the drama that the only other mention of them, and that somewhat offhand, is in connection with the distribution of the loot. It is Abraham who occupies centerstage. Yet the terseness of the account of this campaign, in contrast with the unusually great detail of the preceding one, is very striking. There is no suggestion here of Abraham's great military prowess, and never again is this aspect of his personality and career so much as alluded to. Melchizedek, who came to greet him on his return, ascribes the victory entirely to God, and Abraham tacitly assents. How insecure the patriarch really was may be seen from the next chapter in which God has to reassure him of His protection. "Fear not Abram, I am a shield to you." (15.1)

This delicate shift in the tenor of the narrative from a secular annal to a religious document is further extended in the dealings with the King of Sodom. In response to a generous offer to hand over the entire spoils of war, Abraham indignantly, disdainfully and almost insultingly swears before the Lord that he would not take so much as a thread or sandal strap or anything belonging to the

King, lest the monarch be able to claim that he made Abraham rich. This attitude is easily understandable in the light of the remark in the preceding chapter that the inhabitants of Sodom "were very wicked sinners against the Lord" (12.13). Doubtless, the mention of Lot and the Sodomites in chapter 13 was decisive in fixing the juxtaposition with this story in which the King of Sodom appears so prominently. And Abraham's treatment of the King must have been conditioned by Sodom's evil reputation.

Abraham's rejection of any profit from his campaign also points up the completely disinterested nature of his intervention, which had as its only motive the rescue of his kinsman. (He performs what in rabbinic parlance is termed the duty of *pidyon shevuyim*, "redeeming those taken captive.") Although Lot had quarreled with his uncle and had chosen to live among the Sodomites of his own free will, yet he was still a member of the family and clan and the ties of blood imposed a sense of solidarity and responsibility upon the patriarch so that he could not stand by indifferent to Lot's fate.

The incident with Melchizedek, King of Salem and priest of "God Most High," is most puzzling. It interrupts the continuity of the narrative. If Salem be identical with Jerusalem, as is suggested by its use elsewhere in parallel with Zion [Psalm 76.3], then we are dealing with a Canaanite king. Yet he blesses Abraham in the name of God using the very epithets that the patriarch himself employs in his dialogue with the King Sodom. Moreover, Abraham acknowledges Melchizedek's blessing by paying him a tithe.

There is some evidence to suggest that the incident here recorded was once part of a fuller tradition about Melchizedek. This shadowy figure appears once again in biblical literature referring to a king of Israel being divinely endowed with sacral attributes, "after the order Melchizedek." [Psalm 110.4] This would make sense only if the symbolism were easily understood. It may be assumed, therefore, that a story about this Canaanite priest-king of Jerusalem was well known in Israel.

As to the divine epithets used in the narrative, it is interesting to note that they are all paralleled in Canaanite religious texts. In view of this, Abraham's oath to the King of Sodom is particularly important. Unlike the case of Melchizedek, the text has here prefixed the tetragrammaton, YHWH [Adonai], as though to leave no doubt as to the correct reference. We have here one more example of Israelite appropriation of ancient Near Eastern material, which is then transformed in terms of Israel's religious concepts.

But this is not the whole of the story, for by giving a tithe to the priest, *Abraham actually acknowledges that the deity of Melchizedek is indeed his own* [emphasis Shammai]. The insertion of YHWH, therefore, can only be meant to emphasize the identity, not the difference, between the God of Melchizedek and the God of Abraham, known to the people of Israel as YHWH. This accords with the biblical idea of individual non-Hebrews who acknowledge the one God. Such a one was Jethro; another, Balaam; a third, Job. Melchizedek thus belongs to this category.

Why did the narrative introduce the Melchizedek incident here at all? This question cannot be answered with any degree of certainty, though some plausible suggestions may be put forward. No other patriarchal story is connected with the city of Jerusalem. The fathers built altars at different places, but there is no association with the one place that was later to monopolize the Judean cult. Our story would thus fill in a lacuna. It places the antiquity of Jerusalem's sanctity back into the patriarchal age and makes it a center of pure divine worship acceptable to the religious consciousness of Israel. It also has Melchizedek, the priest-king of Jerusalem, taking the initiative in paying respect to Abraham, an act symbolic perhaps of the future submission of the city to the people of Israel. Lastly, the incident is the first example of the fulfillment of God's initial promise that Abraham's name would become great and be invoked in blessings.

Chapter 14

1 Now, when King Amraphel of Shinar, King Arioch of Ellasar, King Chedorlaomer of Elam, and King Tidal of Goiim

2 made war on King Bera of Sodom, King Birsha of Gomorrah, King Shinab of Admah, King Shemeber of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela, which is Zoar,

3 all the latter joined forces at the Valley of Siddim, now the Dead Sea [Heb. "salt sea"].

4 Twelve years they served Chedorlaomer, and in the 13th year they rebelled.

5. In the 14th year, Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him came and defeated the Rephaim at Ashteroth-karnaim, the Zuzim at Ham, the Emim at Shaveh-kiriathaim,

6 and the Horites in their hill country of Seir as far as El-paran, which is by the wilderness.

7 On their way back they came to En-mishpat, which is Kadesh, and subdued all the territory of the Amalekites, and also the Amorites who dwelt in Hazazon-tamar.

8 Then the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admah, the king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela, which is Zoar, went forth and engaged them in battle in the Valley of Siddim:

9 King Chedorlaomer of Elam, King Tidal of Goiim, King Amraphel of Shinar, and King Arioch of Ellasar—four kings against those five.

10 Now the Valley of Siddim was dotted with bitumen pits; and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, in their flight, threw themselves into them, while the rest escaped to the hill country. [and they fell there—REF; fled there and leaped into them—RA; some tumbled into them, and the rest fled to the hills—CS]

CHAPTER 14

[NS] 1. Amraphel There is no acceptable alternative to the now abandoned identification with Hammurabi.

[RA] 3. joined forces. The verb is a technical military term and initiates a whole chain of military or political terms not evident in the surrounding Patriarchal narratives: "had been subject," "rebelled" (verse 4), "joined battle" (verse 8), "marshaled his retainers" (verse 14), "fanned out against them" (verse 15). The narrative perspective is geostrategic, and there is no dramatic engagement of characters in dialogue until the rather ceremonial and didactic exchange between Melchizedek and Abram at the end.

[NS] 7. En-mishpat, which is Kadesh The full name of Kadesh is Kadesh-barnea, a most important oasis on the southern border of Canaan, which served the Israelites as a leading base during the wilderness wanderings. It is identified with a group of springs 46 miles south of Beer-sheba. The site must have been a cynosure for the pastoral nomads of the Negev and the Sinai Peninsula. As the name Kadesh indicates, the site was a cult center. En-mishpat means "the spring of judgment," a name not otherwise attested, but one that clearly points to its role as a place where the pastoralists would assemble for the adjudication of disputes.

[RA] Hazazon-tamar Identified by II Chronicles 20.2 with En-Gedi.

11 [The invaders] seized all the wealth of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their provisions, and went their way.

12 They also took Lot, the son of Abram's brother, and his possessions, and departed; for he had settled in Sodom.

13 A fugitive brought the news to Abram the Hebrew, who was dwelling at the terebinths of Mamre the Amorite, kinsman of Eshkol and Aner, these being Abram's allies [they were covenant partners of Abram—REF; confederates—RA].

14 When Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he mustered his retainers [meaning of Heb. *chanikh* uncertain], born into his household, numbering 318, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. [trained men—REF]

15 At night, he and his servants deployed against them and defeated them; and he pursued them as far as Hobah, which is north of Damascus.

16 He brought back all the possessions; he also brought back his kinsman Lot and his possessions, and the women and the rest of the people.

17 When he returned from defeating Chedorlaomer and the kings with him, the king of Sodom came out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh, which is the Valley of the King.

[NS] 13. allies Hebrew *ba-alei b'rit* means "those bound by treaty," a term not attested elsewhere. Treaties regulating human relationships were a common feature of the ancient Near East. That between Abram and the three Amorites would seem to have been of the parity type, that is, a treaty between equals rather than between superior and inferior. It appears to have involved mutual military obligations.

14. born into his household That is, a slave born of a slave. Such were regarded as being more reliable than purchased slaves.

318 The fact that this figure is unparalleled in biblical literature and does not conform to any of the usual schematized or symbolic number patterns has been taken as proof of its literal authenticity. However, attention has been drawn to two extrabiblical examples of the number 318, which may suggest its use as a literary device to indicate a large group: a scarab of Amenhotep III (14th century BCE) and the grand total of all persons who suffered violent death in the course of the four days' fighting reported in the Iliad. It has been noted that 318 is the sum of the 12 prime numbers from 7 to 47, which may explain its use symbolically. It remains to be proven that these two examples are not meant to be precise and that the concept of the prime number was recognized in early times.

17. It must have taken several weeks for Abram's troops to have reached Damascus and beyond and then returned. In the meantime, the king of Sodom has regained his kingdom and now comes out to meet the victorious patriarch. This king alone is mentioned because the rescue of Lot, who lived in Sodom, is the focal point of the narrative; because Sodom was the leader of the pentapolis, always listed first; and because the people of the city have earlier been characterized as "very wicked sinners" (13.12). The Narrator deliberately uses the expression "came out to meet him" because of its inherent ambiguity. The Hebrew *yatza likrat* is a neutral phrase deriving its coloration from the context. It may mean "to greet," or, much more frequently, "to confront" [meaning to go out into battle]. The king of Sodom brings no gifts and offers no blessing. As the beneficiary of Abram's heroism, will he express a word of gratitude, or, true to the reputation of his city, will he practice some deceit? We do not know, and, to heighten the suspense, the narrative breaks off temporarily for "goddess." From earliest times, *el* is used outside Israel as the proper name of the deity. In the Bible, *el* either simply refers to the one God or is used as a variant for the divine name Adonai.

18 And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was a priest of God Most High [El 'Elyon].

19 He blessed him, saying, "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. [Blessed is Abram to El the Highest—REF; Blessed be Abram by God Most High—CS]

20 And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your foes into your hand." And [Abram] gave him a tenth of everything.

21 Then the king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give me the persons, and take the possessions for yourself."

22 But Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I swear [lit., "I lift up my hand"] to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth: [I raise my hand in oath to the Lord, the Most High God—RA]

23 I will not take so much as a thread or a sandal strap of what is yours; you shall not say, 'It is I who made Abram rich.'

24 For me, nothing but what my servants have used up; as for the share of the men who went with me—Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre—let them take their share." [lads—RA]

18. Elyon, from the root meaning "to ascend," expresses the absolute transcendence of God.

19. He blessed him He invoked God's blessing upon the patriarch, an act that recalls 12.1- 3.

Blessed be Abram The Hebrew could also mean "Blessed is Abram," an acknowledgment or affirmation of a reality exemplified by the victory.

Creator of heaven and earth This universalistic formula, echoed by Abram in verse 22, well fits the international background of the events. It acknowledges that the processes of human history are under divine guidance.

20. gave him a tenth Abram gives Melchizedek a tithe of all the spoils of war. It has nothing to do with the later annual tithing system of Israel.

21-24. Having discharged his duty to his kinsman and paid his dues to the priest-king, the patriarch wishes to have nothing more to do with Sodom. He disdainfully rejects any idea of profiting personally from the operation.

22. I swear Literally, "I lift up my hand," a gesture accompanying oath-taking to this day.

Chapter 15

1 Some time later, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. He said, "Fear not, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great."

2 But Abram said, "O Lord God, what can You give me, seeing that I shall die childless, and the one in charge of my household [and my household is an acquired person—REF] is Dammesek Eliezer!"

3 Abram said further, "Since You have granted me no offspring, my steward [a member of my household—REF, RA; one of my slaves—CS] will be my heir."

CHAPTER 15

[NS] 1. Some time later literally "after these things," implies a sequence that is not necessarily immediate. Here, however, the close connection with the preceding events is unmistakable.

Fear not The patriarch fears the possibility of revenge by the defeated kings. The phrase "fear not" occurs numerous times throughout the Bible, mainly spoken by God. It is also found in extrabiblical literature in a genre known as "oracles of assurance." These oracles were given to a king before battle.

I am a shield Poetic simile of divine protection, used especially in the Book of Psalms.

Your reward This assurance is clearly associated with Abram's refusal to have any part of the spoils of war, mentioned in 14.22ff. The material reward, so disdainfully spurned, is to be vastly exceeded by a recompense of a different kind, even though the prospects were as yet only on the distant horizon.

2. For the first time Abram speaks to God. In unquestioning obedience to the divine command, he had broken his ties with his family and become a wanderer in a strange land. His life had been repeatedly in danger. The years had rolled by and the promises of progeny had not materialized. Through it all Abram maintained his silence. Now the measure of recurring disappointment and prolonged frustration has reached its limit. The bonds of restraint are broken, and the patriarch bares the bitterness of his soul in a brief, poignant outburst bordering on utter despair.

O Lord God This Hebrew divine title, rarely used in the Torah, appears here for the first time. It is used in a context of complaint, prayer, and request. Here the word for "Lord" is Adonai [in its meaning as] "my Lord," not the divine name Adonai, and its use suggests a master-servant relationship. Abram does not permit his vexation to compromise his attitude of respect and reverence before God.

What can You give me? No material reward can equal the blessing of having children.

the one in charge of my household Hebrew *ben meshek beiti* is a unique phrase, the meaning of which is uncertain.

Eliezer Strangely, the name Eliezer is never again mentioned in passages referring to Abraham's servant.

3. granted me no offspring Hebrew *li*, "to me," is placed in an emphatic position before the verb, so that it carries the sense of "no offspring of my own."

will be my heir This statement reflects a society in which a servant can become heir to a childless couple. Numerous ancient Near Eastern documents provide for the adoption of a stranger who inherits the estate in return for the performance of filial duties. These include paying the adoptive parents the proper respect, maintaining the household, taking care of their physical needs and comforts in their old age, and performing the funerary rites at their death. In such cases, the adopted son cannot be deprived of a share of the inheritance even if there are subsequently natural-born sons. Thus, God's emphatic and unambiguous reply in verse 4 can only mean that the patriarch, despairing of having children, had decided to resort to the adoption of his servant but has not yet acted. God assures him that this will not be necessary.

4 The word of the Lord came to him in reply, "That one shall not be your heir; none but your very own issue [one who will come out of your insides—REF; from your own body—CS] shall be your heir."

5 He took him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He added, "So shall your offspring be."

6 And because he put his trust in the Lord, He reckoned it to his merit [considered it for him as virtue—REF; reckoned that as loyalty in him—CS].

7 Then He said to him, "I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to assign this land to you as a possession [give you this land to inherit—RA]."

8 And he said, "O Lord God, how shall I know that I am to possess it [shall inherit it—RA]?"

6. he put his trust in the Lord The scene that opens with fear and depression closes with a firm statement that Abram remains steadfast in his faith in God. The promises must be realized, even in the face of a seemingly recalcitrant reality.

to his merit Abram's act of faith made him worthy of God's reward, which is secured through a covenant.

7. I am the Lord This is the first use of this solemn, introductory, self-identifying formula. It is not the disclosure of a hitherto unknown name, but an emphasis on the unimpeachable authority behind the accompanying declaration.

who brought you out The entire sentence is suggestive, probably deliberately so, of the opening words of the Decalogue in Exodus 20.2. Biblical usage of the verb "to bring out" is predominantly in reference to the Exodus context. The two pivotal, formative events in the history of the Jewish people are Abram's exodus from his homeland and the Exodus from Egypt. The relationships between God and Abram and between God and Israel are in each case conditioned and regulated by these divine acts.

to assign this land The divine order to Abram in 12.1-3 said nothing of a gift of land, but such had been the original intention of God, unrevealed at the time.

8. how shall I know The question has to be understood in light of God's reply in verse 13: "Know well..." The affirmation of Abram's trust in God in verse 6 referred to the pledge of offspring, which must obviously materialize in his lifetime. The present query relates to the reiterated promise of national territory. Abram is here speaking not as an individual, but as the future nation personified. What is to be the process by which that nation will take physical possession of its promised land?

9-17. In response, God contracts a solemn covenant with the patriarch, who becomes the passive beneficiary of His unilateral obligation, unconditionally assumed. The text does not explain the elaborate ritual that is followed. Clearly no sacrifice is involved, for there is no altar, no mention of the sprinkling of blood as in Exodus 24.8, and no suggestion that the animals are either eaten or burnt. The meaning of the ceremonials is to be sought elsewhere. The Hebrew term for covenant-making is *k-r-t b'rit*, literally "to cut a covenant" (verse 18). The corresponding phrase is very widely used in one form or another in the ancient world. All those analogues demonstrate that the cutting up of the animal was a crucial element in the treaty-making procedure.

The ceremony described here in Genesis 15 utilizes contemporary legal forms and procedures but has undergone subtle transformation in the context of the narrative. In contrast to the rest of the patriarchal biography, the event lacks any notice of its locale and of the age of Abram at the time. For the first time in the history of religions, God becomes the contracting party, promising a national territory to a people yet unborn. This pledge constitutes the main historic title of the Jewish people to its land, a title that is unconditional and irrevocable, secured by a divine covenant whose validity transcends space and time.

9 He answered, "Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old she-goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young bird [pigeon—RA]."

10 He brought Him all these and cut them in two, placing each half opposite the other; but he did not cut up the bird.

11 Birds of prey [carrion birds—RA; vultures—CS] came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away.

12 As the sun was about to set, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a great dark dread descended upon him.

13 And He said to Abram, "Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed 400 years;

14 but I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go free with great wealth.

9. a three-year-old A beast of three years was considered to be full grown and was broken for service. A less likely translation is "threefold," meaning three of each species.

a young bird It probably is a pigeon since this bird is usually paired with the turtledove.

10. cut them in two The list of beasts and birds must have suggested at once a covenant ceremony, for Abram knows to slice and arrange the items without being so told. The Hebrew stem *b-t-r* [ב-ת-ר], "to sever," contains the same consonants as *berit* [ברית], "covenant," and is otherwise used only in the similar context of Jeremiah 34:18f.

the bird Hebrew *tzippor* is here a collective. The two birds were probably placed face to face. The exceptional nonseverance of the birds may be solely due to their small size, but there may also be some lost symbolism relating to fertility.

11. In Egyptian art, the carrion-eating falcon represents the important god Horus with whom the living king was identified. It is possible, therefore, that the sudden appearance of the birds of prey, and of Abram successfully warding them off, symbolically portends the sharp and menacing change that is to take place in the fortunes of the Israelites at the hands of the Egyptians while it also prefigures their rescue through the merit of the patriarch.

13-16. The future as unfolded here holds three successive stages of suffering: alienage, enslavement, and oppression, to be followed by three successive stages of redemption: judgment on the oppressor, the Exodus, and settlement in the promised land. It is obvious that the biblical conception of the origins and growth of the people of Israel—the idea of nationhood resulting from a process of natural proliferation rather than through the amalgamation or confederacy of existing tribes—means that the realization of the divine promises can be envisaged as taking place only after the passage of many years. The nebulous future of the previous promises is now translated into historical time.

400 years This figure presents an unresolved riddle. No indication is given as to the year from which the reckoning begins. Moreover, it does not seem to accord with the mere "four generations" of verse 16, and it is not identical with the 430-year figure given in Exodus as the entire period of time spent in Egypt.

14. I will execute judgment The reference, of course, is to the 10 plagues.

great wealth Either in restitution for the years of slave labor or in accordance with the law in Deuteronomy 15.13f. that an emancipated slave must be liberally provisioned by the master.

15 As for you,
You shall go to your fathers in peace;
You shall be buried at a ripe old age.

16 And they shall return here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete [is not yet full—RA; for not until then shall the iniquity of the Amorites be repaid—CS].”

17 When the sun set and it was very dark [there was a thick gloom—RA], there appeared a smoking oven, and a flaming torch which passed between those pieces.

18 On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I assign this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,

15. You shall go to your fathers A unique term for dying. Elsewhere the expression is to “lie down with one’s fathers,” or to be “gathered to one’s kin.” In whatever form, the phrase certainly originates from a belief in an afterlife in which one is reunited with one’s ancestors irrespective of where they are buried. The biblical sources are perplexingly vague and sparse on the issue of afterlife.

16. the fourth generation If “generation” (Heb. *dor*) is the span of time between the birth of children and the birth of their parents—an average period of approximately 20-25 years—then the phrasing implies at most 100 years, only one quarter of the period prescribed in verse 13. Yet, unless one posits the preposterous notion of a mindless narrator or editor, the two figures must be reconcilable. A study of the Hebrew word *dor* and its Semitic cognates indicates a very fluid and inde terminate use of the word. Job, for example, lived 140 years after being rehabilitated, a period said to cover “four generations.” It is best, then, to take *dor* as a “cycle of time” or “life span.” There is no fixed biblical calculation for the human life cycle. In Genesis 6.3 it is 120 years, in Isaiah 65:20 it is 100 years, in Psalms 90.10 it varies between 70-80 years. In ancient Egypt the ideal life span was 110 years. The “four generations” in the present passage may thus be understood as the sum of four life spans, a figure in no way incompatible with the 400 years of the pre-Exodus period.

the iniquity of the Amorites The fate and destiny of the future people of Israel is to be intertwined with that of other peoples. The history of all mankind is under the moral governance of God. The displacement of the native population of Canaan by Israel is not to be accounted for on grounds of divine favoritism or innate superiority. The local peoples, here generically called “Amorites,” have violated God’s charge. The universally binding moral law has been flouted and the inhabitants of Canaan have been doomed by their own corruption, as texts like Leviticus 18:24f. and 20:23f. explicitly state. Yet God’s justice is absolute. The limit of His tolerance of evil has not yet been reached, and Israel must wait until God’s time is ripe. Divine justice is not to be strained—even for the elect of God, and even though its application relates to pagans.

The principal party, here God, passes between the pieces. He is represented by the smoke and the fire, 20 which are frequent symbols of the Divine Presence. As in a legal document, the nature of the instrument of transfer is defined, its promissory clause is specified as concerning a grant of land, and the extent of the territory involved is delineated in geographic and ethnographic terms.

18. the river of Egypt The southwestern boundary of Canaan is generally depicted as the “Wadi of Egypt,” which is to be identified with Wadi el-Arish. This marks the boundary between the settled land and the Sinai desert. The unique “river of Egypt” here is not the Nile, which is called ye’or in the Bible, as in Genesis, Exodus and elsewhere, but must be its most easterly arm, which then emptied not far from Port Said.

the great river The geographic boundaries given here represent a generalized ideal that cannot be reconciled with any historic reality of the past. They include Tyre-Sidon, Lebanon, and Byblos, which the Davidic-Solomonic empire, even at its height, never encompassed. Moreover, the conquests of David aimed at asserting political and economic control beyond the borders of Israelite settlement, but there was no attempt to dispossess the local population and to settle Israelites in their stead.

19 the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites,
20 the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim,
21 the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”

Chapter 16

1 Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. She had an Egyptian maidservant [slavegirl—RA; slave—CS] whose name was Hagar.

2 And Sarai said to Abram, “Look, the Lord has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid [come to bed with my slavegirl—RA]; perhaps I shall have a son a through her [maybe I’ll get ‘childed’ through her”—REF; perhaps I shall be built up through her—RA].” And Abram heeded Sarai’s request.

3 So Sarai, Abram’s wife, took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian—after Abram had dwelt in the land of Canaan 10 years—and gave her to her husband Abram as concubine [as a wife—REF, RA, CS].

CHAPTER 16

Ten years have elapsed since Abram parted from his father (verse 3). Throughout this decade of frustrated hopes his wife has suffered in silence. Now the impatience of the infertile Sarai has reached a critical point. Since the divine promises in chapter 15 did not specify that she herself was to be the mother of Abram’s offspring, in her desperation she takes the initiative and resorts to the device of concubinage.

1. The opening verse furnishes the basic information essential to the understanding of the drama. The issue is Sarai’s infertility; the *dramatis personae*, Sarai and Hagar; their respective social status, wife and maidservant.

Egyptian maidservant The stress on her origin may have ironic significance in light of the prediction in the “covenant between the pieces” that the descendants of Abram were to be enslaved and oppressed in Egypt.

Hagar The name suggests a connection with Arabic *hajara*, “to flee,” and may mean “fugitive.” A people named “Hagrites,” mentioned in Psalms I Chronicles, appears to have been pastoralists and to have roamed the Syro-Arabian desert. Classical Greek writers mention the Agraioi or Agreis, whose domicile was northern Arabia, and there may be a connection between Hagar and these people.

2. kept me from bearing In ancient times barrenness was imputed to the woman, not the man, although God was seen to be its ultimate cause.

perhaps I shall have a son Hebrew *ibaneh* contains a *double entendre*, suggesting both the stem *b-n-h*, “to build,” and *ben*, “a son.” Akkadian *banu* similarly may mean “to build” and “to engender.” Here, as in many cultures, family and posterity are depicted in terms of a house.

through her The custom of an infertile wife providing her husband with a concubine in order to bear children is well documented in the ancient Near East. In Sarai’s case, it is unclear whether she had fully despaired of ever having children of her own or whether her action reflects the widespread popular belief that a woman who is unable to conceive may become fertile by adopting a child.

Abram heeded As Ramban (Nachmanides) points out, Abram took Hagar solely in response to his wife’s urging, not out of lust. Hebrew *va-yishma* contains a hint of *yishmael*.

4 He cohabited with Hagar and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her esteem.

5 And Sarai said to Abram, "The wrong done me is your fault [my injury is on you—REF; this outrage against me is because of you—RA; her mistress became for her an object of scorn—CS]! I myself put my maid in your bosom [in your arms—CS]; now that she sees that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her esteem. The Lord decide between you and me!"

6 Abram said to Sarai, "Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right." Then Sarai treated her harshly [degraded her—REF], and she ran away from her.

7 An angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the road to Shur,

8 and said, "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?" And she said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai."

9 And the angel of the Lord said to her, "Go back to your mistress, and submit to her harsh treatment [suffer the degradation under her hands—REF]."

10 And the angel of the Lord said to her,
"I will greatly increase your offspring,
And they shall be too many to count."

4. her mistress was lowered in her esteem A natural consequence of a situation in which barrenness is regarded as a disgrace. Ancient law codes reflect the diminished social position of the barren wife.

5. is your fault By giving Hagar to Abram, Sarai has relinquished her exclusive authority over her, and it is Abram's responsibility to control her behavior.

6. treated her harshly The Hebrew verb used here implies that Sarai subjected Hagar to physical and psychological abuse. It carries with it the nuance of critical judgment of her actions. According to Ramban, "the matriarch sinned by such maltreatment, and Abraham too by permitting it."

7. As between Sarai and Hagar, there is no doubt as to where the sympathies of the Narrator lie. God, the guardian of the weak and the suffering, reveals Himself to the lowly Egyptian maidservant, bringing her a message of hope and comfort.

An angel of the Lord This is the first appearance of an angel in biblical literature.

on the road to Shur Hagar fled in the direction of her native land, for Shur is elsewhere described as being "close to Egypt." Since *shur* (Aramaic *shura*) means a wall, the reference is most probably to the wall of fortifications built in the eastern Delta along the line of the present-day Isthmus of Suez in order to protect Egypt from the incursions of Asiatics.

spring on the road to Shur In the Hebrew, the "spring on the road to Shur" contains a play on words: *ayin* may mean "an eye" as well as "a spring," and *shur* can mean "to see" and also "a wall." The place where Hagar takes refuge thus suggests "a seeing eye." She calls God *El-roi*, "God of seeing," and the well after the "Living One Who sees me" (verse 13).

10-12. This is the first of several such instances of an announcement by a divine messenger predicting the birth and destiny of one who is given a special role in God's scheme of history. This event anticipates the divine promise to the patriarch in 17.3-6 that he will be the father of many nations.

10. increase your offspring Ishmael is to become the father of 12 tribes and of a great nation. The fulfillment of the promise is later recorded in 25:12-18

11 The angel of the Lord said to her further, "Behold, you are with child
And shall bear a son;
You shall call him Ishmael,
For the Lord has paid heed to your suffering.

12 He shall be a wild ass of a man;
His hand against everyone,
And everyone's hand against him;
He shall dwell alongside of all his kinsmen [he will encamp in despite of all his kin—RA; he shall dwell in
(permanent) opposition to all his kin—CS]."

13 And she called the Lord who spoke to her, "You Are El-roi," by which she meant,
"Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me ["Have I also seen after the one who sees me here?"—
REF]!"

11. Ishmael The name means "God hears." It originated as an indication of a divine response to the prayer of the parents for a son or as a prayer name expressing the hope that God may heed the infant's cry for help. Here the name is given a special twist and is interpreted as "God has paid heed to your suffering"—a unique phrase in the Hebrew. It is noteworthy that the image of Ishmael in the Bible, as distinct from later Jewish literature, is by and large not a negative one. He is not an inveterate enemy of Israel. In fact, there seems to have been some intermingling between the tribe of Simeon and the Ishmaelites.

12. a wild ass of a man Like the wild ass among the beasts, so are the Ishmaelites among men. In their nature and destiny they call to mind the sturdy, fearless, and fleet-footed Syrian onager, who inhabits the wilderness and is almost impossible to domesticate. Jeremiah describes the wild ass of the desert: "snuffing the wind in her eagerness, whose passion none can restrain." Hagar, the abused slave woman subjected to the harsh discipline of her mistress, will produce a people free and undisciplined.

his hand against everyone This prediction reflects the unceasing tension that exists between the sedentary and nomadic populations in the Near East.

alongside of all his kinsmen The idea seems to be that the Ishmaelites and related tribes will live in close proximity to each other. The Hebrew may also express defiance and hostility, and the phrase could as well be translated "at odds with all his kinsmen."

13. Hagar the slave is spiritually stirred by her revelatory experience. She has become conscious of God's concern for the downtrodden.

she called the Lord Literally, "she called the name of Adonai." The name is inextricably bound up with existence and with the nature and character of the Being who bears it. Hagar gives expression to her personal discovery by designating God after the particular aspect of His providence that she has experienced. [She also is the first person in the Torah to nae God—Shammai.]

El-roi The vocalization of the second element occasions a marvelous ambiguity that permits the following translations of the name: "God of seeing," that is, the all-seeing God; "God of my seeing," that is, whom I have seen; "God who sees me." Most likely, the several meanings are intended to be apprehended simultaneously. When God "sees," it is, of course, that He shows His concern and extends His protection; when Hagar "sees," she experiences God's self-manifestation.

14 Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi [the well lahai-roi—REF] ; it is between Kadesh and Bered.

15 Hagar bore a son to Abram, and Abram gave the son that Hagar bore him the name Ishmael.

16 Abram was 86 years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

Chapter 17

1 When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am El Shaddai. Walk in My ways and be blameless [and be pure of heart—CS].

2 I will establish My covenant [let Me place My covenant—REF] between Me and you, and I will make you exceedingly numerous.”

3 Abram threw himself on his face; and God spoke to him further,

14. The well is mentioned again only in connection with Isaac.

15. The narrative takes for granted that Hagar returned to Sarai, as bidden. Significantly, it is Abram who named the child, not Hagar, thus implying that he legitimated him.

CHAPTER 17

The “covenant in the flesh” has much in common with the “covenant between the pieces” of chapter 15, presupposing and supplementing it in various ways. The covenant ceremony there described is the basis for the key term b’rit, “covenant,” which the Narrator employs more than a dozen times in this chapter. Here, moreover, this covenant is thrice redefined as an “everlasting covenant.” In the earlier passage, Abram is a passive recipient of God’s unilateral obligation. Now God summons him to be an active partner in the covenant. In both sections the revelation opens with the divine, self-introductory formula, “I am” Both promise a son, but here, for the first time, the matriarch is specifically designated as the future mother. Both chapters promise numerous progeny and national territory, but here the latter is to be “an everlasting possession.” Finally, both sections record the patriarch’s emotional reaction to God’s announcement.

The connection between chapters 15 and 17, which was recognized early, is reflected in a later biblical prayer that interweaves citations from both: “You are the Lord God, who chose Abram, who brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and changed his name to Abraham. Finding his heart true to You, You made a covenant with him to give the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, and Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite to give it to his descendants” (Nehemiah 9.7f).

1. the Lord Since this is the sole appearance of the name Adonai in this chapter, as opposed to nine usages of elohim, the exception must be purposeful. The idea is to leave no doubt that the name “El Shaddai” is to be identified with Adonai.

Walk in My ways Literally, “Walk before Me.” As a corresponding Akkadian phrase indicates, this expression seems originally to have been a technical term for absolute loyalty to a king. It appears in Assyrian land-grant documents in which the monarch rewards his subject with a grant of land in perpetuity. In the Bible, to “walk before God” takes on an added dimension. Allegiance to Him means to condition the entire range of human experience by the awareness of His presence and in response to His demands.

and be blameless The phrase is a near synonym of the preceding clause. Because Hebrew *tamim* is often used in ritual texts in the sense of “without blemish,” as for instance in Leviticus 1:3,10, rabbinic tradition connects the term to the following law of circumcision. In this view, circumcision removes the “blemish” from the male person by making him a whole being, so to speak, in his relationship to God.

3. threw himself on his face An expression of awe and submission in the presence of the Lord.

4 "As for Me, this is My covenant with you: You shall be the father of a multitude of nations.

5 And you shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations.

6 I will make you exceedingly fertile [fruitful—REF, RA, CS], and make nations of you; and kings shall come forth from you.

7 I will maintain My covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and to your offspring to come.

8 I assign the land you sojourn in to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting holding. I will be their God."

9 God further said to Abraham, "As for you, you and your offspring to come throughout the ages shall keep My covenant.

10 Such shall be the covenant between Me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised.

11 You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.

4. father of a multitude of nations In the narrow sense, the reference may be to the Ishmaelites, Edomites, Midianites, and several other peoples descended from Abraham, according to the genealogical lists of Genesis 25 and 36. However, the phrase has a more universal application in that a larger segment of humanity looks upon Abraham as its spiritual father.

5. The expansion of his name from "Abram" to "Abraham" is in harmony with the patriarch's extended role. In light of the great importance with which the Bible invests name-giving generally, a change of name is of major significance and symbolizes the transformation of character and destiny. In the psychology of the ancient Near Eastern world, a name was not merely a convenient means of identification but was intimately bound up with the very essence of being and inextricably intertwined with personality. The inauguration of a new era or a new state policy would frequently be marked by the assumption of a new name on the part of the king.

Abram ... Abraham Henceforth the patriarch is referred to invariably by the expanded form of his name, which carries with it an intimation of his God-given destiny. The meaning imposed upon the name Abraham—"the father of a multitude of nations"—is not etymological but is obtained by giving a literalistic twist to the initial divine promise in Genesis 12.2, "I will make your name great," that is, your name Abram will be enlarged by the addition of a syllable. The anomalous grammatical formulation supports the midrashic nature of the interpretation.

7. to be God to you So again in verse 8. This phrase belongs to the formal language of the covenant and recurs frequently in the Bible. God elects Israel to be His special people; He demands exclusive allegiance in return.

to you and to your offspring to come This expression occurs six times in this chapter and also appears in 35.12 and 48:4 in connection with the covenantal promises. It too is legal terminology, as shown by the Aramaic legal papyri from the Jewish military colony at Elephantine (Aswan), Egypt. The inclusion of the phrase in documents relating to the devolution of property upon the death of the owner assured that the real estate automatically passed on from generation to generation without restriction.

12 And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days. As for the homeborn slave and the one bought from an outsider who is not of your offspring,

13 they must be circumcised, homeborn, and purchased alike. Thus shall My covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact.

14 And if any male who is uncircumcised fails to circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his kin; he has broken My covenant.”

8. an everlasting holding A phrase used again in 48.4. National ownership of the land is to be eternal, like the covenant itself. As Radak remarks, “Even though the people might be exiled from it for a while, yet it remains their inalienable possession, and they will return to it.”

I will be their God The association of the Jewish people, the Land of Israel, and God is indissoluble and constitutes the rock on which Jewish civilization is built.

9-14 God’s promises demand an active response from their recipients. Circumcision is both a token of God’s covenant and a symbol of the Jew’s consecration and commitment to a life lived in the consciousness of that covenant. The law of circumcision that now follows is the first mitzvah in the Torah that is specifically directed to Abraham and his descendants.

10. every male This restriction intentionally excludes the practice of female circumcision, found in many parts of the world.

11. the sign An outward, physical reminder of the existence of the covenant.

12. eight days The radical reinterpretation of the common practice of circumcision from a pubertal or nuptial rite to a covenantal rite is reinforced by the unique shift of the operation to the eighth day after birth. The incidental result, noted in a midrash, is that the rite becomes more humane because it avoids the physical and psychological effects attendant upon the performance of circumcision at a more mature age. The eighth day is particularly significant because the newborn has completed a seven-day unit of time corresponding to the process of Creation. In like manner, Exodus 22.29 stipulates that the first-born of an animal is dedicated only on the eighth day after birth, and Leviticus 22.27 lays down that an animal is not fit for sacrifice before that day.

who is not of your offspring This explanatory note is unique among the numerous passages that mention the “outsider.” It is occasioned by the recurring reference to “your offspring” in this chapter.

13. in your flesh The ineradicable nature of circumcision symbolized the enduring, irrevocable nature of the covenant.

14. his foreskin That is, his own foreskin. Where the father fails to fulfill his duty, the responsibility falls upon the individual himself when he reaches maturity.

shall be cut off There are 36 instances of this formula in the Torah. The punishment, known as karet in rabbinic parlance, is peculiar to ritual texts and is largely confined to offenses of a cultic and sexual nature. The Torah gives no definition of karet, and no analogy exists in Near Eastern sources. In most texts the impersonal, passive form of the verb is used, as here, so that not only the type of punishment but also the executive authority is uncertain. This reasonably leads to the assumption that karet is not a punishment enforced in the courts, but a penalty left to divine execution. Such is the understanding of the term in rabbinic literature. Certainly, the general idea is that one who deliberately excludes himself from the religious community cannot be a beneficiary of the covenantal blessings and thereby dooms himself and his line to extinction.

15 And God said to Abraham, "As for your wife Sarai, you shall not call her Sarai, but her name shall be Sarah.

16 I will bless her; indeed, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she shall give rise to nations; rulers of peoples [kings—REF; RA] shall issue from her."

17 Abraham threw himself on his face and laughed, as he said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at 90?"

18 And Abraham said to God, "O that Ishmael might live by Your favor [will live before you—REF; let Ishmael live (happily) before You]!"

19 God said, "Nevertheless, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac; and I will maintain My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring to come.

20 As for Ishmael, I have heeded you. I hereby bless him. I will make him fertile and exceedingly numerous. He shall be the father of 12 chieftains, and I will make of him a great nation.

21 But My covenant I will maintain with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year."

22 And when He was done speaking with him, God was gone from Abraham.

15-22 Abram's name change is connected with the law of circumcision. That of Sarai must therefore be separately recorded.

15. Sarai ... Sarah No interpretation of the matriarch's name is given, but the succeeding blessing about "kings/rulers" who will issue from her suggests an implicit midrash based on wordplay, for Hebrew *sar*, "prince, ruler," is often paired with *melech*, "king." Further, there may well be an oblique reference to Sarah as the progenitrix of the future Israel, for in Genesis 32,29 that name is said to derive from Jacob's having "striven with beings divine and human." The Hebrew verb stem used there is *s-r-h* [שרה]. In fact, the revised form *sarah* is simply a modernizing of the archaic *sarai*, the second syllable being an old Semitic female ending.

and laughed The laughter fortokens the name of the son of destiny that Sarah will bear him (verse 19). Is it the laughter of joy, surprise, doubt—or perhaps a little of each?

Can ... or can ... ? The double question essentially describes two conditions that in combination produce a state of affairs that is manifestly inimical to the notion of Abraham and Sarah producing a child.

18. by Your favor Hebrew *lifnei* seems to have this meaning in other texts. Abraham fears for the life of Ishmael because God's words appear wholly to exclude the boy from the benefits of the covenant.

19-21. God reassures Abraham, point by point.

19. Isaac Hebrew *yitzchak* is a verbal form meaning "He laughs." All three biblical traditions relating to the birth of Isaac emphatically connect the name with human laughter, which can be seen as a questioning of divine sovereignty and power. The person of Isaac, therefore, represents the triumph of the power of God over the limitations of nature. No wonder he receives his name from God Himself.

22. God was gone Literally, "went up," implying that God had "come down" to speak with Abraham. The verb frequently occurs in a context of divine self-manifestation; it means the termination of divine communication.

23 Then Abraham took his son Ishmael, and all his homeborn slaves and all those he had bought, every male in Abraham's household, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins on that very day, as God had spoken to him.

24 Abraham was 99 years old when he circumcised the flesh of his foreskin,

25 and his son Ishmael was 13 years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

26 Thus Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised on that very day;

27 and all his household, his homeborn slaves and those that had been bought from outsiders, were circumcised with him.

23-27 Without delay, "on that very day," Abraham fulfills the divine command and circumcises the entire male population of his household. The concept of kinship here is that of the residential unit, whether interrelated familiarly or not. Abraham's household constitutes an inclusive community henceforth united by the common symbol of circumcision as a newly adopted rite, deriving from a divine command and not from tradition. However, it is clear from verse 21 that heirship to the covenant promises is to be based on an exclusive matrilineal principle.