W. Gunther Plaut: Issues in Vayera

About those angels

The three "men" of whom the opening story in Vayera speaks belong, according to the biblical setting, to a category of superior beings with special powers. They appear in a variety of forms, sometimes as humans and sometimes in other shapes (such as cherubim). They can speak, stand, sit, walk, be clothed; they can have weapons, ride horses, descend from heaven on a ladder. Their function may be to worship and to do God's bidding (such as observing the activities of people, see Job 1.6-8) or, most frequently, to carry a divine message. Because of this latter function, the name *malach* (messenger) is often given to these beings. Its Greek translation is *anglos*, hence our English "angel."

Belief in angels was widespread in the ancient Near East. Mesopotamian and Hittite deities had their subordinate ministers, and Egyptian sources tell how the gods communicated with each other through couriers. In addition, the motif of hospitality to a divine being in disguise, such as we have here, was well known in ancient legend. These ancient concepts formed the background out of which the biblical stories emerged. In post-biblical Judaism, as well as in Christianity and Islam, these concepts were developed into an elaborate structure of "angelology."

In the biblical story, the "annunciation" by the angels is no more than an announcement of Isaac's forthcoming birth. There is no hint of superhuman paternity as in similar myths of the Greeks. The announcement is supernatural, but not the conception. Isaac will not have the dual paternity of the Homeric heroes, who assume the office of their human fathers and derive their power from their divine fathers. Note, for example, Ovid's story of Hyrieus and Tamagra, a childless couple who are visited by Jupiter, Neptune, and Mercury. They do not know that these men are gods, and they too are promised a son. Far from becoming a superman, Isaac will, in fact, be a rather modest link in the patriarchal chain.

However, it has been suggested that something of a much larger original "Isaac cycle" existed in which conception through divine agency played a much clearer role. The Bible reduced this and perhaps other aspects of some earlier Isaac saga; and normative Judaism divested itself of the consequences of the annunciation, which came to re-echo in Christianity. The Church tradition that compares the sacrifice of Isaac with the sacrifice of Christ notes that "the sacrifice of Isaac would have meant not only the sacrifice of Abraham's son, but of God's."

No 'Argument' here

The dramatic confrontation between Abraham and God is told in Vayera's second episode with the utmost simplicity; the cadences of repetitions vary as subtly as the repetitions of a symphonic theme. Abraham does not believe the people might repent, and he does not ask for mercy. Nor does he doubt the existence of God's justice; he asks only its extent and limitations.

The important thing is that he asks altogether and that God does not reject his question out of hand. The Torah thereby makes clear that we may, with impunity, question the behavior of God. Like Abraham, we need not surrender our sense of justice; we remain free to accept or reject the divine judgment, although we will have to submit to it in the end. We are not reduced to moral automatons; our spiritual freedom is preserved.

It has been suggested that Abraham bargains with God, but in fact he does no more than plead. His pleas may be seen as attempts to penetrate the division separating the earthly and heavenly realms. In the end, Abraham has greater knowledge of the divine intention, but is not given an intimation whether he succeeded in changing God's mind, or whether—more likely—he merely learned what had been God's plan from the beginning. God's ways are ultimately "past finding out." (Job 9.10), but this does not prevent humans from trying to bring them as much as possible within their own horizon of understanding.

And this horizon is not, in Abraham's case, limited by tribal considerations. He is not concerned merely with Lot or his family but with people outside his tribe. His is a universal concept of justice.

There also is here the concept of the "Merit of the Few." Abraham does not plead merely for the innocent but for the sinners as well, through the merit of the few righteous. The story thereby introduces the concept of merit (*z'chut*), important in biblical and especially in postbiblical religion. The concept stipulates that a handful of concerned, decent, and "righteous" people could have averted Sodom's calamity by their merit.

Yet the story also suggests there are limits to the influence of even the best. Unless they find a minimum of like-minded associates, they will be ineffective. Eventually, if they persist in living in such a society, they will perish with it. Thus, Abraham does not, in his pursuit of divine equity, go below the number 10. The Rabbis advised that if one could not find 10 religiously minded people in a city, one should move away. They also set 10 as the minimal number (*minyan*) required for communal worship. There comes a time when even the merciful and just God is "done speaking" with us (Genesis 18.33) and when the punishment for unchecked evil will take its inevitable course and engulf all of society.

The Sins of Sodom and Gomorrah

The terms "outrage," "outcry," "destroy," prominent in the third episode, are reminiscent of the story of the Flood, where we were told that the world was "filled with lawlessness." While here such a general definition is lacking, the similarity of expressions suggests that comparable moral conditions existed in both instances. We can infer from the story itself that Sodomites were inhospitable and that they were bent on forcing their sexual craving on Lot's guests. Nonetheless, Jewish tradition stresses social rather than sexual aggression as the reason for the cities' destruction.

Ezekiel, for instance, describes the sins of Sodom in social terms. "Pride, fullness of bread, and careless ease was in her and in her daughters; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were haughty" (16.49-50). The tradition of Sodom's moral insensitivity, based on the way they treated strangers, highlighted, to the biblical age, Sodoms essential depravity. To the ancients, hospitality included vastly more than good manners; it meant the treatment and acceptance of strangers and was a vital aspect of religion (Deuteronomy 10.19). If Sodom had been a poor city, the sin of inhospitality might have been understandable and forgivable. But the city was rich, "like a divine Garden" (Genesis 13.10).

Social evil, then, caused Sodom to perish. The Tanach thus takes the old story of the physical destruction of the plain and turns it into a moral tale that carries its warning to all ages. Affluence without social concern is self-destructive; it hardens the conscience against repentance; it engenders cruelty and excess. The treatment accorded newcomers and strangers was then and may always be considered a touchstone of the community's moral condition.

The Hagar-Ishmael Saga. Human Feelings and Divine Purpose

Underlying the Hagar-Ishmael episode that is the parashah's fifth (the fourth being the abduction of Sarah by King Abimelech of Gerar) is the essential affinity between the Israelites and Ishmaelites; there can be no question about the writer's sympathy for these tribal cousins. As in chapter 16, this sympathy is elicited for Hagar and her child, and again Abraham and Sarah are depicted as human and fallible. The aged matriarch prevails upon her husband to relieve her of the presence of her maid. The Torah attempts no justification of Abraham or Sarah, nor certainly of God. In the story, God's ultimate designs prevail, so that human actions reflect the mysterious way of the Deity. What on a human plane appears as Sarah's harsh and overprotective behavior is on the divine level part of God's plan. Sarah's desires coincide with the idea of destiny; hence, her actions find God's approval while Abraham's do not.

Here may be seen the deeper meaning of the story. Abraham's natural feelings of compassion for Hagar and Ishmael must yield to the divine scheme in which Isaac and his descendants will have a special place. The Tanach portrays the human sentiments of the patriarch in tension with the inexplicable divine choice, a tension between human love and divine will.

This is also the theme of the Akedah, of Isaac's sacrifice, the seventh and final episode that follows the Hagar-Ishmael one after a brief episode, again involving Abimelech. There, too, Abraham's human love is pitted against the stern demands of God. Thus, the stories complement each other: both deal with the mysterious purposes of the One who encompasses the whole world and is at the same time the Guiding Force of the people of Abraham and Isaac.

The Akedah

The practice of human sacrifice, which was well known to the ancients and central to the cults of Israel's neighbors, stands as a backdrop to the final episode. In the framework of his time and experience, Abraham could have considered the command to sacrifice his son entirely legitimate. Otherwise, he might have protested God's command with the kind of insistence he exhibited at Sodom and Gomorrah.

God's demand must have struck Abraham as harsh and bitter, but not as ungodly. It is, therefore, important to notice that in the beginning of the test the command is issued by Elohim—the generic term for God or gods—and the command is one that other elohim could and did make. But when the sacrifice is about to be performed, it is Abraham's God, Adonai, who stays his hand. Elohim might ask him to proceed, while Adonai says "no." To be sure, divine service may require extreme devotion, but it will never again take this form.

Abraham's religion not only rejects the sacrifice of a son by a father but rejects, as well, its use as a theological theme. This is in stark contrast to Eastern religions and to Christianity, in which a father's sacrificial gift of his son plays an important role.

The text sets forth the main theme by saying that God puts Abraham to the test, but it does not state precisely what he is tested for. Is it to test his faith that God's design can be trusted, or of Abraham's unquestioning obedience, his faithfulness rather than his faith, his total submission to a mysterious divine will? Most likely both, for faith and faithfulness were seen as dual aspects of humanity's relation to God. Together, they may be said to represent the quality of *emunah*, "adherence without faltering" or "obedience with complete trust," which is as authentic a reflection of God's qualities as is humanly possible. For even God is obedient to the divine law and promise. Hence, it is possible for the Tanach to call God *El emunah*, a faithful God, in Deuteronomy 32.4. And in this sense we can speak of Abraham as *ish emunah*, a faithful man.

Abraham's act is represented as the ultimate sanctification of God in this world: the offering up of that which is dearest to him. Yet the test, like Abraham's hand, remains suspended in air; like life, the test remains open-ended. When it is over, Abraham has proved himself for the moment. God sees what Abraham is, but what he will be remains hidden even from God. There will be new trials and challenges awaiting him in the future [although we will not be made privy to them; practically speaking, his story ends here—Shammai]. In pursuing this thought, the Midrash reads the whole story of Abraham as a succession of 10 severe tests.

Questions about the God of the Akedah

Why must God, who knows all things, test Abraham? Maimonides answers that God tested Abraham (*nisah*), knowing that he would pass the test. Abraham's faith would shine like a beacon and be a sign (*nes*) to the nations. The emphasis is therefore not on Abraham's ordeal but on his strength.

A radically different explanation is offered by Franz Rosenzweig, who sees in the test a temptation by God. According to this view. God's purposes are concealed purposely; in fact, humans must occasionally be misled. If everything were clear, we would be automatons and those least free, most timid and fearful would be the most "pious." But evidently God wants only the free, and so makes it difficult—impossible—to understand His actions. This gives us the opportunity to ground our faith and trust in freedom. And so there remains nothing for God but to tempt us, even to deceive us.

Many will find it difficult to believe in a "misleading God," but if we believe at all in God, it must be in a deity who is free, just as we are free—free even to defy the divine will or foreknowledge. There remains unresolved a contradiction between these freedoms, a contradiction inherent in God's relationship to us ever since the days of Eden.

What kind of God is Adonai? How can a compassionate God be portrayed as asking for the sacrifice of a child?

One answer: The test came at a time when human sacrifice was still an acceptable practice and that, therefore, in terms of its own age it was merely the extreme test (and, after all, God did not exact the final price); God thus may require of people in every age to give up that which they love most, and often asks not the expected but the awesomely unexpected. Perhaps the final proof of faith and obedience rests in attempting the impossible for the sake of God.

Another explanation reinterprets the text to say that it only appeared to Abraham that God asked him to sacrifice his child; such a request could not possibly square with the fundamental laws of morality. A midrash, therefore, suggests that Abraham misunderstood God altogether. It has God saying. "Did I tell you, 'Slaughter him?' Did I not rather tell you, 'Bring him up?'"—a wordplay on ah-lah (הלע), which can mean both. "You brought him up and bound him on the altar; now take him down again!" In this view of the story, the test both succeeds and fails. It succeeds in that it proves Abraham to be a man of faith and obedience, but it fails in that Abraham's understanding of God's nature remains deficient.

Of Fathers and Sons

Even as God is the dominant Father and Abraham a trusting and obedient son in the Akedah episode, so in the purely human realm does Abraham appear as the dominant father and Isaac as the archetype of the submissive son. Only once does Isaac speak and ask the fateful question; thereafter, he is a mere object in the drama. Abraham, the prince and patriarch, the honored and aged friend of God, overawes his timid son, whose will to independence may well have been crippled by doting and protective parents. He has no personality apart from his father. As one they walk together to the sacrifice (Genesis 22.8), and silently Isaac submits to the dreadful act.

The story may thus be read as a paradigm of a father-and-son relationship. In a way, all parents seek to dominate their children and are in danger of seeking to sacrifice them to parental plans or hopes. In the biblical story, God is present and can therefore stay the father's hand. In all too many repetitions of the scene God is absent and the knife falls. Thus is the Akedah repeated forever, with its test and its terror.

There was, however, a remarkable tradition that insisted that Abraham completed the sacrifice and that afterward Isaac was miraculously revived. In part this arises out of the discussion on the question. "Why do people place ashes on their heads on the occasion of a public fast?" The answer is related to the "ashes of Isaac." According to this Aggadah [a non-legal exegetical text], Abraham slew his son, burned his victim, and the ashes remain as a stored-up merit and atonement for Israel in all generations. For this reason, Isaac's sacrifice is invoked in prayer, and Rabbi Ephraim hen Jacob of Bonn (12th century C.E.) composed a poem on the subject. This interpretation of the Akedah was given bitter relevance in medieval times, when many Jewish parents killed their own children and then committed suicide to avoid forcible conversion, captivity, and torture at the hands of the Crusaders.

Parashat Vayera (Genesis 18.1-22.24)

Chapter 18

1 The Lord appeared to him [was seen by him—EF] by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot.

2 Looking up, he saw three men standing near him [standing over him—REF; standing over against him—EF; before him—RA]. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground,

3 he said, "My lords, if it please you, do not go on past your servant.

[NS] ***1. The Lord appeared to him*** Unlike most theophanies, this one is not accompanied by an act of worship; in fact, hospitality to strangers itself becomes an act of worship. As the Talmud puts it, "Hospitality to wayfarers is greater than welcoming the Divine Presence" (Babylonian Talmud tractate Shabbat 127a).

[RA] ***The Lord appeared.*** The scene seems to be a monotheistic adaptation to the seminomadic early Hebrew setting of an episode from the Ugaritic Tale of Aqhat (tablet V:6-7) in which the childless Dan'el is visited by the craftsman-god Kothar. As Moshe Weinfeld observed, there are several verbal links between the two texts: Dan'el also is sitting by an entrance, overshadowed by a tree; he also "lifts up his eyes" to behold the divine visitor; and similarly enjoins his wife to prepare a meal from the choice of the flock.

[NS] ***as the day grew hot*** Toward noontime. The Tanach contains no precise vocabulary for the division of time into hours, minutes, and seconds. Time of the day is designated by a subjective experience only.

2. Looking up, he saw The men appear with startling suddenness at a time of day when people would not normally be out. There seems to be nothing superhuman about their appearance. Abraham perceives them to be human, as will the people of Sodom. They are repeatedly designated "men," although they are also called "angels" in the next episode. Their arrival as a group of three is without analogy in the Tanach.

he ran Abraham does not wait for them to approach but takes the initiative in offering hospitality.

bowing to the ground A gesture of honor and respect.

[REF] 3. My Lord. One probem here is to whom is Abraham talking? He bows to three people them, but then speaks to God. Is he meeting God, people, or angels? Several of the biblical stories involving angels contain such confusions between when it is God and when it is the angel who is speaking or doing something. But it is confusing only so long as we imagine angels as independent beings separate from God. Angels, rather, are conceived here as expressions of God's presence. In other words, although God Himself can never be seen, He can make Himself known by a sort of emanation visible to human eyes. It is a hypostasis (a concrete expression of the divine presence), which is otherwise inexpressible to human beings. Thus Jacob can encounter an angel and still say "I've seen God face to face" (Genesis 32.31). And Abraham can face three angels and address "my Lord." And an angel can speak God's words in first person or can speak about God in third person. All this is so because in some ways an angel is an identifiable thing itself, and in others merely a represents a divine presence in human affairs.

[NS] The problem Friedman speaks of results from the opening address, which is in the plural, *adonai*, rather than adoni (my lord); adonai is otherwise reserved for God. Rabbinic opinion in BT Sh'vu-ot 35b is divided as to whether *adonai* is in this instance secular or sacred. Rashi and Ibn Ezra understand it to mean "my lords"; Maimonides, the Rambam, renders it "my Lord," as Friedman does above. Since it is clear the patriarch at this point is unaware of the true identity of the strangers, the present vocalization serves as an indication to the reader that the three "men" are no ordinary wayfarers. (But see Shammai's essay on this.)

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*

4 "Let a little water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree.

5 "And let me fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves [your hearts]; then go on—seeing that you have come your servant's way." They replied, "Do as you have said."

6 Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Quick, three seahs of choice flour [choice semolina flour—RA; wheat flour—CS]! Knead and make cakes!"

7 Then Abraham ran to the herd, took a calf [a young ox—EF], tender and choice, and gave it to a servant-boy, who hastened to prepare it.

8 He took curds and milk [sour milk and (sweet) milk—CS] and the calf that had been prepared and set these before them; and he waited on them under the tree as they ate.

9 They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he replied, "There, in the tent."

10 Then one said, "I will return to you next year [at the time of life—REF; when time revives—EF; at this very season—RA; at this time next year—CS], and your wife Sarah shall have a son!" Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent, which was behind him.

11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years; Sarah had stopped having the periods of women.

4–8. Abraham's openhearted, liberal hospitality to the total strangers knows no bounds. He specifies the use of "choice flour," that is, the finest and choicest of wheat flour, the type from which meal offerings were later brought to the sanctuary. He himself selects the calf for the main dish, a rare delicacy and a sign of princely hospitality among pastoralists. He provides curds and milk, the basic products of a pastoral economy. Curds are the coagulated state of the fatty part of the milk, corresponding to the modern *leben* or yogurt. Milk was highly esteemed in the ancient Near East and was offered to the gods. It was regarded as a source of vitality and possessor of curative powers. Abraham personally serves the strangers this rich fare and stands close by ready to attend to their needs.

[RA] ***4. Let a little water be brought.*** With good reason, the Jewish exegetical tradition makes Abraham figure as the exemplary dispenser of hospitality. Extending hospitality, as the subsequent contrasting episode in Sodom indicates, is the primary act of civilized intercourse. Avot di Rabbi Natan aptly noted that Abraham promises modestly, a little water and a morsel of bread, while hastening to prepare a sumptuous feast. The speed with which Abraham hurries to prepare the food and drink is another indicator of his hospitable activity.

[Shammai] ***Three seahs*** equals 97 cups, enough for over 48 pitot or about 15 pounds of bread loaves.

[NS] 8. ***as they ate*** Early exegesis, as represented by Josephus (Antiquities 1.197), Targum Yonatan, and the Talmud, would not accept the notion of angels partaking of food, and understood the phrase to mean they only gave the appearance of eating (BM 86b).

9. Where is your wife Sarah? A rhetorical question meant to open a conversation about Sarah.

[RA] ***Where is your wife Sarah?*** The fact that the visitors know her name without prompting is the first indication to Abraham that they are not ordinary humans.

[NS] ***10.*** The divine promise has been unfolding in stages; now a time is set for the fulfillment of the promise.

Then one said The translation "one" is justified by the singular Hebrew verb, following the plural of verse 9.

I will return The statement is not meant to be literal. It simply means, as Ramban (Nachmanides) noted, that by this time next year the prediction will have been fulfilled.

12 And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?"

13 Then the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?'

14 "Is anything too wondrous for the Lord? I will return to you at the same season next year, and Sarah shall have a son." [At that set-time I will return to you, when time revives, and Sara will have a son—EF; At this fixed time, next year, I will return to you—CS]

15 Sarah lied [pretended (otherwise)—EF; dissembled—RA; denied—CS], saying, "I did not laugh," for she was frightened. But He replied, "You did laugh."

16 The men set out from there and looked down toward Sodom, Abraham walking with them to see them off.

17 Now the Lord had said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do,

[TWC] ***13. "Why did Sarah laugh?"*** Some interpreters have concluded, erroneously, that Sarah's laughter was derisive. When Abraham heard that he would have a child with Sarah, he "fell flat on his face and laughed, thinking: 'Can a child be born to a man of 100? Can 90-year-old Sarah bear a child?" (17.17). Thus Sarah is actually now accused of Abraham's earlier actions. Since Sarah is alone in the tent when she laughs, is the Deity testing Abraham to determine if he will admit his own actions and protect Satah? Notes Tikva Frymer-Kensky, who considers Sarah's laughter as an expression of doubt: "God ignores Abraham's laughter but reacts to Sarah's. After all, Sarah should understand how important she is....Sarah's importance in God's scheme means that God will have zero tolerance for skepticism from her."

[NS] ***15. Sarah lied*** The Tanach does not gloss over the human failings of national heroes. [Plaut has Abraham confronting Sarah, rather than God, who speaks only to Abraham.]

she was frightened No wonder! She laughed to herself, and her innermost thoughts had been read!

16. This statement deftly and smoothly forges the link between the first scene and the next, firmly closing the one and delicately intimating the other.

looked down toward Sodom They must have been standing at some vantage point within walking distance from Hebron from which the Dead Sea region was visible.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT ABOUT SODOM (verses 17–22)

[WGP] ***17. Shall I hide from Abraham?*** Perhaps God wants Abraham to argue the justice of the divine plan. Rashi writes: God has appointed Abraham as the "father of a multitude of nations" (Gen. 17:5), and hence the people of Sodom are his children, too. Should God not tell a father the fate of his children? Rashi's argument reflects the Mishnaic discussion about Hebrew prayers to be recited by converts. The proof text in the argument is Gen. 17:5, because there Abraham is called the "father of a multitude of nations," and hence all converts to Judaism are called sons of Abraham.

[NS] God now makes Abraham privy to one of His historic decisions. Ten generations earlier He had disclosed His secret purposes to Noah (6:12f), but only in order to save the man's life. Here foreknowledge permits Abraham to plead disinterestedly for other people's lives. In this revelation to Abraham of God's intentions toward Sodom, both the patriarch's humanity and God's morality are put to the test. Abraham is granted this singular privilege because he symbolizes the future Jewish nation, which is destined to become a source of blessing to other nations. As such, he cannot avoid direct involvement in the fortunes of humanity at large.

[NS cont'd] At the same time, he is the repository of those eternal values of righteousness and justice that constitute "the way of the Lord." God relies upon him to transmit this heritage to his posterity, which is the indispensable precondition for the fulfillment of the divine promises. The lessons of Sodom and Gomorrah, the judgment of God, and the actions of Abraham exemplify the principles of justice and righteousness, divine and human.

[WGP] The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is mentioned so often in the Tanach that nothing but a historic cataclysm of startling proportions could have impressed itself so deeply on popular memory. In addition, there are parallel tales about it, and there were probably observable ruins in the area that reminded people of what once happened in these parts. The cities most likely stood near the south end of the present Dead Sea. The district is filled with bitumen and salt formations and is part of a deep rift that reaches from Armenia to Central Africa and that runs north/south through the Aravah Valley. The rift is presumed to be the result of a catastrophic earthquake, which might have raised the level of the Dead Sea sufficiently to flood what was formerly the Valley of Siddim, and to submerge the cities. (The destruction encompassed apparently all the "cities of the Plain," that is, the cities mentioned in Genesis 14. Only Zoar may have been spared.)

The purpose of the biblical tale is not, however, to report natural events as such, but to present these events in the light of religious insight. God destroyed the cities because the people were evil. The story therefore intertwines the natural and the supernatural, employing symbols and folklore, in order to teach the effects of moral depravity.

A remarkable confrontation introduces the drama. Apprised of the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham rises to argue God's justice and questions the divine judgment. His pleading fails not because his moral stance is faulty, but because his premise is wrong: There are not enough righteous people in the cities who could make a difference.

With this story, it becomes clear that Abraham's religion is more than a set of cultic practices. It deals with human beings and their problems and with Abraham's faith in a God of righteousness.

[EF] With Verse 17 there begins a remarkable scene in which man confronts God. As if to emphasize the importance of this encounter, the text presents God as thinking out loud, and using the intimate term "know" to describe his relationship to Avraham. And Avraham, through whom the nations "will find blessing," the progenitor of "a great...nation" that will see in justice its great goal, is now confronted with an urgent question of justice.

While Avraham seems to be testing God in this story, it may in fact be precisely the reverse that is intended. Perhaps here more than anywhere else in the entire cycle (with the possible exception of Chapter 22), Avraham appears as the worthy father of his people, the one who will "charge his sons and his household...to do what is right and just" (v. 19). Without this story, Avraham would be a man of faith but not a man of compassion and moral outrage, a model consistent with Moses and the Prophets of Israel.

The tightly structured, almost formal dialogue allows us to focus totally on the issue at hand. Predominating as refrains are the words "innocent" and "guilty," along with the expected versions of "Just/justice" that pervade Avraham's remarks.

18 "since Abraham is to become a great and populous nation and all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him [will find blessing through him—EF]?

19 "For I have singled him out [I have known him—EF; I have embraced him—RA; I have selected him—CS], that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right [to do righteousness and justice—RA], in order that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him."

20 Then the Lord said, "The outrage [outcry—EF, RA, CS] of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin so grave!

21 I will go down to see whether they have acted altogether according to the outcry that has reached Me [whether, as the outcry that has come to Me, they have dealt destruction—RA; whether they are wreaking havoc in equal measure to the shrieking that is coming to Me—CS]; if not, I will take note."

[RA] ***19. by doing what is just and right.*** This is the first time that the fulfillment of the covenantal promise is explicitly made contingent on moral performance. The two crucial Hebrew nouns, *tzedek* and *mishpat*, will continue to reverberate literally and in cognate forms through Abraham's pleas to God on behalf of the doomed cities, through the Sodom story itself, and through the Abraham-Abimelech episode that follows it.

[NS] ***20–22.*** The sin and cataclysmic punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah have converted the names of those two cities into a permanent metaphor of human wickedness and divine retribution. The first hint of the immorality of their inhabitants was the bare observation in 13.13 that they were "very wicked sinners against the Lord."

The narrative now speaks of "outrage" and "outcry" (so also 19.13). These two terms are identical; the Hebrew stems *z-a-k (זעק)* and *ts-a-k (צעק)* are dialectical variants of each other. They connote the anguished cry of the oppressed, the agonized plea of the victim for help in the face of some great injustice. In the Tanach, these terms are suffused with poignancy and pathos, with moral outrage and soul-stirring passion. God heeded the "outcry" (Heb. *tse'akah,* צעקה) of His people against the harsh slavery of Egypt in Exodus 3.7; His "anger blazes forth" when He hears the "outcry" of the ill-treated widow and orphan in Exodus 22.21-23; and to the prophet Isaiah, in 5.7, an "outcry" is the absolute negation of justice and righteousness.

Tse'akah is especially used in connection with the suffering of the poor and the impoverished victims of avaricious exploitation. The sin of Sodom, then, is heinous moral and social corruption, an arrogant disregard of basic human rights, a cynical insensitivity to the sufferings of others. As Ezekiel sums up the situation in 16.49: "Only this was the sin of your sister Sodom: arrogance! She and her daughters had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquility; yet she did not support the poor and the needy. In their haughtiness, they committed abomination before Me; and so I removed them...."

The indictment of Sodom lies entirely in the moral realm; there is no hint of cultic offense, no whisper of idolatry. As with the Flood story, the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative assumes the existence of a universal moral law that God expects all humankind to follow. The idea that there is an inextricable connection between the social and moral behavior of a people and its ultimate fate is one of the pillars upon which the entire biblical interpretation of history stands.

21. I will go down to This stated intention is an element in the motif of theodicy, or the vindication of divine justice, that is essential to the Sodom narrative. As the wickedness of the city appears to reach intolerable proportions, God personally investigates the situation. The fate of the inhabitants of Sodom is not yet sealed. At this point, the humanity of Abraham is put to the test.

22 The men went on from there to Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord [while the Lord was still standing before Abraham—RA]**.**

[WGP] ***22. Abraham remained standing before the Lord.*** In this verse, "the men" are clearly distinguished from God. God had thus appeared as the third "man."

[NS] This seemingly intrusive note is really connected with verse 16. Here it makes for a slight pause in the narrative, as though to insinuate the idea of Abraham briefly struggling with himself as to whether he should plead the cause of Sodom or, like Noah before him, remain indifferent to the fate of his fellow beings.

[RA] while the Lord was still standing before Abraham. The Masoretic Text, as translated above, has Abraham standing before the Lord, but this reading is avowedly a scribal euphemism, what the Talmud calls a *tikun sofrim*, introduced because the original formulation smacked of an insult to God.

EXPOSTULATION WITH GOD (verses 22–33)

[NS] In each of the three times Abraham has spoken with God (Gen. 15.2,8; 17.17), his personal welfare was the sole subject of discourse. The next dialogue with God involves the welfare of total strangers. Abraham displays an awareness of suffering and an ability to respond beyond his personal interests. He shows himself to be a moral man, a compassionate person. His behavior at this moment makes him the paradigm of "the just and the right," qualities that are to characterize his descendants (verse 18). Abraham now stands before God to plead for the lives of depraved pagans. He senses kinship with the people of Sodom and feels himself involved in their fate. The ensuing dialogue assumes that the man of faith is not expected to accept morally absurd behavior with silent resignation. God rules the pagans, judges their deeds, decides their fate, and executes His decisions. His universality finds expression, above all, in His punishment of pagans for moral corruption because He is the architect of a societal pattern that is universal in scope.

Because God is universal and omnipotent, humankind needs assurance that His almighty power is not indiscriminately applied and that He is not capricious like the pagan gods. Abraham's struggle to apprehend the nature of God's purposes assumes God must act according to a principle that man can try to understand. That principle is the passion for righteousness. "Shall not the Judge of all earth deal justly?" he protests. It is this faith in God's justice that gives rise to the argument with God, whose intent to destroy Sodom appears to raise serious conflict with the patriarch's conviction about His moral governance of the world.

The patriarch's contention that the innocent not be made to suffer with the guilty is clear enough. More complicated is his request that the entire city be spared for the sake of an innocent minority. This is no longer a simple appeal to the attribute of justice, but a call for divine mercy. It carries with it two implications: Indirectly it asserts that there is a greater infraction of justice in the death of an innocent few than in allowing a guilty majority to escape retribution; it assumes that the merit of a minority is powerful enough to overcome the wickedness of the majority. These are major themes in later biblical literature because divine mercy can also be divine tolerance of evil, a problem of serious dimensions to prophet and sage alike. The second issue, the question of individual versus communal responsibility, has a long history of controversy.

Absent from the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative, as well as from the Flood story, is the theme of repentance. Just as Noah did not call upon his contemporaries to repair their ways, neither Abraham nor the messengers warn the people of Sodom of the impending disaster in the hope of arousing them to atonement. This is in sharp contrast to the story of Jonah, in which the reluctant prophet gives the sinful city of Nineveh 40 days' notice of the punishment about to descend upon it, and the penitent response of the contrite citizens succeeds in averting the evil decree.

The theme of repentance plays a major and indispensable role in the theological outlook and religious teachings of the great literary prophets. They pound away at it incessantly, lamenting the inability of the people to understand and accept it. Repentance becomes part of the great prophetic vision about "the end of days." But it is not to be found in the Noah and Sodom narratives. These belong to the earliest traditions of Israel and derive from a time before the doctrine of repentance had been developed.

23 Abraham came forward and said, "Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?

24 What if there should be 50 innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent 50 who are in it?

25 Far be it from You [Heaven forbid—EF] to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You [Heaven forbid—EF]! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?"

26 And the Lord answered, "If I find within the city of Sodom 50 innocent ones, I will forgive the whole place for their sake."

27 Abraham spoke up, saying, "Here I venture to speak to my Lord, I who am but dust and ashes:

28 What if the 50 innocent should lack five? Will You destroy the whole city for want of the five?" And He answered, "I will not destroy if I find 45 there."

29 But he spoke to Him again, and said, "What if 40 should be found there?" And He answered, "I will not do it, for the sake of the 40."

30 And he said, "Let not my Lord be angry if I go on: What if 30 should be found there?" And He answered, "I will not do it if I find 30 there."

31 And he said, "I venture again to speak to my Lord: What if 20 should be found there?" And He answered, "I will not destroy, for the sake of the 20."

[Shammai] ***25. Far be it.*** There is no adequate way to define the Hebrew term chalilah l'cha, חלילה לך, used here by Abraham. "Far be it for you" or "heaven forbid" are not strong enough. Commenting on Abraham's use of the phrase, Elie Wiesel has this to say in his book, A Jew Today: "To be a Jew means to serve God by espousing man's cause; to plead for man while recognizing his need of God. And to opt for the Creator and His creation, refusing to pit one against the other. Of course man must interrogate God, as did Abraham; articulate his anger, as did Moses; and shout his sorrow, as did Job. But only the Jew opts for Abraham—who questions— and for God, who is questioned... only the Jew knows that he may oppose God as long as he does so in defense of His creation."

[NS] 27. ***but dust and ashes*** Abraham approaches God with profound deference and humility, displaying unsurpassed human greatness.

[RA] ***but dust and ashes*** Like the previous verbal exchange with the three visitors, this whole scene is a remarkable instance of the use of contrastive dialogue in biblical narrative. In the preceding scene, Abraham is voluble in his protestations of hospitable intention, whereas the three visitors only answer impassively and tersely, "Do as you have spoken." Here, Abraham, aware that he is walking a dangerous tightrope in reminding the Judge of all the earth of the necessity to exercise justice, deploys a whole panoply of the abundant rhetorical devices of ancient Hebrew for expressing self-abasement before a powerful figure. At each turn of the dialogue, God responds only by stating flatly that He will not destroy for the sake of the number of innocent just stipulated.

[WGP] ***28. For want of the five?*** Abraham is not only a pleader for justice, he is also a strategist and begins his bargaining with a modest reduction of five.

32 And he said, "Let not my Lord be angry if I speak but this last time: What if 10 should be found there?" And He answered, "I will not destroy, for the sake of the 10."

33 When the Lord had finished speaking to Abraham, He departed; and Abraham returned to his place.

Chapter 19

1 The two angels arrived in Sodom in the evening, as Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to greet them and, bowing low with his face to the ground [bowing all the way to the ground—CS; nose to the ground—REF; brow to the ground—EF],

2 he said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house to spend the night, and bathe your feet; then you may be on your way early." But they said, "No, we will spend the night in the square [in the open—CS]."

3 But he urged them strongly, so they turned his way and entered his house. He prepared a feast for them and baked unleavened bread [flatbread—RA], and they ate.

[NS] ***32. ten*** Abraham has reached the limit of the ability of a righteous individual to outweigh the cumulative evil of the community. Ten is a round and complete number that symbolizes totality. Ten persons thus constitute the minimum effective social entity.

[RA] ***33. returned to his place*** [to Hebron] The report of a character's returning to his place or home is a formal convention for marking the end of an episode in biblical narrative. But this minimal indication has a thematic implication here—the contrast between Abraham's "place" in the nomadic, uncorrupted existence in the land of promise and Lot's location in one of the doomed cities of the plain.

CHAPTER 19

[NS] ***1. sitting in the gate*** The gate of a large city usually comprised towers and guardrooms and a large area where people could sit. An example is the city gate uncovered at Tell Dan, which has a stone bench 15 feet long around the wall of one of its towers. The gate area in an ancient Near Eastern city served as a civic center where the affairs of the community would be conducted in full view of, and with full participation of, the citizens. Here gossip would be exchanged and disseminated, business transacted, and justice dispensed. Many of the legal documents from Nuzi close with the formula, "The tablet was written after the proclamation in the entrance of the gate."

2. house Lot lived formerly in a tent "near Sodom" (13.12). Now he has become a townsman and resides in a house inside the city (cf. verses 4, 10f). Although he has changed his style of life, he still preserves the virtue of hospitality that is characteristic of a pastoral society generally, and particularly of a member of Abraham's family.

be on your way early The strangers are urged to get out of town before the people of Sodom become aware of their presence.

No These messengers are unafraid. Moreover, they must test the inhabitants to learn whether or not their evil reputation is in fact deserved (cf. 18.21). Normally, it would be unthinkable for a stranger to have to lodge in the open for want of hospitality.

the square Biblical Hebrew *r'chov* is not a street, but a broad open square or plaza.

3. unleavened bread Matzah is baked before the dough has time to rise. It can be very quickly prepared for unexpected guests.-

[RA] This is a scantyTanachlooking "feast." In contrast to Abraham's sumptuous menu, the only item mentioned is the lowly matzah, not even the loaves from fine flour that Sarah prepares.

4 They had not yet lain down, when the townspeople, the men of Sodom, young and old—all the people to the last man [all the people (even) from the outskirts—EF]—gathered about the house.

5 And they shouted to Lot and said to him, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may be intimate with them [so we can have them—CS; that we may know them—RA; and let's know them—REF]."

6 So Lot went out to them to the entrance, shut the door behind him,

7 and said, "I beg you, my friends, do not commit such a wrong.

8 Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you may do to them as you please; but do not do anything to these men, since they have come under the shelter of my roof [the shadow of my roof-beam—EF]."

9 But they said, "Stand back! [Get out of the way—CS; Step aside—RA, EF; Come over here—REF] The fellow," they said, "came here as an alien, and already he acts the ruler! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." And they pressed hard against the person of Lot, and moved forward to break the door.

10 But the men stretched out their hands and pulled Lot into the house with them, and shut the door.

11 And the people who were at the entrance of the house, young and old, they struck with blinding light [they struck the people who were at the house's entrance with blindness—REF], so that they were helpless to find the entrance.

[NS] ***4. Young…to the last man*** The choice of words is very deliberate. Not a single decent individual can be found (cf. 18.24-32).

[REF] ***5. be intimate*** The people are threatening sexual abuse of the guests. This is possible and even likely (in light of a parallel story in Judges 19). But this episode is also commonly understood to be about homosexual rape. I see no basis for this whatever. The text says two people come to Sodom, and that all of the people of Sodom come and say, "Let's know them." The homosexuality interpretation apparently comes from misunderstanding the Hebrew word *anashim* to mean "men" instead of "people."

8. It seems to me that it is bargaining that accounts for what is going on here. Lot is supposed to make an extraordinary gesture. He offers his own daughters. But no one is supposed to take him up on it. And then, in this horrible town, the gesture does not work anyway. The people only become angry.

[NS] ***who have not known a man*** Lot is not appealing to the passions of the men of Sodom, but is underscoring the seriousness with which he treats the value of hospitality.

[RA] Lot surely is inciting their lustin using the same verb of sexTanachual "knowledge" they had applied to the visitors in order to proffer the virginTanachity of his daughters for their pleasure.

[NS] ***9. The fellow*** Literally, "the one," a contemptuous epithet. Lot is reminded of his isolation and his alien status. Being a *ger*, he is without legal rights and protection, and is entirely dependent on the goodwill of the local community. Despite his best efforts, he cannot fully assimilate into Sodom's society, and when it comes to the test, he remains an outsider. [Plaut sees here "the reaction of the native-born to the immigrant."]

11. blinding light The Aramaic Targums understand the Hebrew *sanverim* to mean a dazzling brightness. The people of Sodom did not suffer the usual kind of sightlessness (*ivvaron*), but a sudden, immobilizing, blazing flash of light.

12 Then the men said to Lot, "Whom else have you here? Sons-in-law, your sons and daughters, or anyone else that you have in the city—bring them out of the place.

13 For we are about to destroy this place; because the outcry against them before the Lord has become so great that the Lord has sent us to destroy it."

14 So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who had married his daughters, and said, "Up, get out of this place, for the Lord is about to destroy the city." But he seemed to his sons-in-law as one who jests [he appeared to be joking—CS, RA; like he was a joker—REF].

15 As dawn broke, the angels urged Lot on, saying, "Up, take your wife and your two remaining daughters, lest you be swept away because of the iniquity of the city."

16 Still he delayed. So the men seized his hand, and the hands of his wife and his two daughters—in the Lord's mercy on him—and brought him out and left him outside the city.

17 When they had brought them outside, one said, "Flee for your life! Do not look behind you, nor stop anywhere in the Plain; flee to the hills, lest you be swept away."

18 But Lot said to them, "Oh no, my lord!

19 You have been so gracious to your servant, and have already shown me so much kindness in order to save my life; but I cannot flee to the hills, lest the disaster overtake me [the evil may take hold of me—CS; the wickedness cling to me—EF] and I die.

20 Look, that town there is near enough to flee to; it is such a little place! Let me flee there—it is such a little place—and let my life be saved."

21 He replied, "Very well, I will grant you this favor, too, and I will not annihilate the town of which you have spoken.

THE DELIVERANCE OF LOT AND HIS FAMILY (verses 12–16)

12. Sons-in-law. . . This simply may be a list of possible relatives, not of Lot's actual family. The mention of sons-in-law before sons is strange.

13. the outcry In 18.20f. the guilt of the city is still to be proved. Now its guilt is established beyond all doubt. Its punishment is inevitable.

14 who had married This rendering, which is that of the Septuagint, assumes that Lot had two married daughters in the city. The Hebrew, however, does not use a defined verb, which leaves open the possibility that the reference is to his prospective sons-in-law.

as one who jests Their fault lies not in their disbelief, but in their lack of seriousness, which reveals their insensitivity to the enormity of the moral evil about them.

15. remaining daughters Or, "your two daughters who are here."

16. Lot's deliverance is an act of divine grace undeserved by any merit on his part. Perhaps his hospitality to strangers was a contributory factor.

17. Do not look behind you That is, do not linger.

the hills That is, to the highlands of Moab.

18. my lord Hebrew *adonai* is here treated by many commentators as non-sacred. Others understand it as a direct plea to God.

[RA] ***20–22. a little place*** [Hebrew *mitz'ar* is a play on *tzo'ar* (Zoar).\ Lot's point is that it is, after all, only a piddling town and so it would not be asking a great deal to spare it from destruction.

22 Hurry, flee there, for I cannot do anything until you arrive there." Hence the town came to be called Zoar [Tzo'ar/Tiny—EF].

23 As the sun rose upon the earth and Lot entered Zoar,

24 the Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah sulfurous fire [brimstone and fire—REF, CS, RA] from the Lord out of heaven.

25 He annihilated those cities and the entire Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities and the vegetation of the ground.

26 Lot's wife looked back [behind him—REF, MSS], and she thereupon turned into a pillar of salt.

[NS] THE CATACLYSM (verses 23–39)

Here, and in all subsequent references to Sodom and Gomorrah, the biblical narrative focuses upon the moral significance of the events. For this reason, the description of the catastrophe is terse to the point of obscurity. This brevity, and the absence of external sources from the biblical period, renders any reliable reconstruction of the details all but impossible. Moreover, even the location of the cities cannot be pinpointed. No archaeological remains exist or can be identified to provide material for scientific investigation. The ruined cities have vanished without leaving a trace.

The most obvious and most plausibleexplanation of the cataclysm is an earthquake. The entire Jordan Valley is part of the Syrian-African Rift, a gigantic fracture in the crust of the earth caused by a series of geological spasms. It stretches from Syria in the north, down the Aravah to the Gulf of Akaba, through the Red Sea to the Upper Nile Valley and on to Lake Nyasa in East Africa. In this Sodom story. we may well be dealing with a description of one of the last earthquakes that shaped the lower Jordan Valley area in historical times.

It is well known that fissures formed by quakes often allow heat and gases to escape from the earth. Lightning, frequently present during earthquakes, would have ignited the sulfur and bitumen existing in the area (14.10). A catastrophic conflagration would result. This would explain the utter ruination of the cities, the extinction of their inhabitants, and the obliteration of all vegetation in the region (verse 24), as well as the smoke that Abraham saw rising from the land (verse 28).

24. the Lord...the Lord The repetition, like the phrase "out of heaven," dramatizes the conviction that what occurred was not a meaningless accident of nature, but a purposeful event, the expression of God's direct intervention in human affairs in order to redress the balance of justice.

sulfurous fire Sulfur is Latin for "burning stone," or "brimstone" in Old English. The fire here, like the water in Noah's day, may have a symbolically purgative function as it does in the narrative of Numbers 16.35 and in the law of Numbers 31.23. It may also be a metaphor of divine anger, as in Deuteronomy 32.22 and Isaiah 65.5.

26. looked back She lingered in flight and was overwhelmed by the spreading devastation.

a pillar of salt The tradition, preserved in Deuteronomy 29.22, describes ruination of the soil by sulfur and salt. "She wholly disappeared in a blanket of salt; yet popular notion has her body turning into salt and still recognizable," writes B'chor Shor. This idea must have been suggested by some grotesque salt-rock formation in the vicinity of the Dead Sea. The pre-Christian book, The Wisdom of Solomon (10.4), says, "A pillar of salt stands as a memorial to an unbelieving soul"; and Josephus (Antiquities 1.203) claims to have seen it in his day.

The origin of the salt tradition must lie in the presence of Mount Sodom (Jebel Usdum), the base of which is a ridge of rock salt that extends for about five miles. The salt, too, may have a symbolic function; in the ancient Near East, a site was strewn with salt as a mark of eternal desolation in punishment for disloyalty and a breach of a treaty (e.g., Judges 9.45).

27 Next morning, Abraham hurried to the place where he had stood before the Lord,

28 and, looking down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and all the land of the Plain, he saw the smoke of the land rising like the smoke of a kiln.

29 Thus it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain and annihilated the cities where Lot dwelt, God was mindful of Abraham and removed Lot from the midst of the upheaval.

30 Lot went up from Zoar and settled in the hill country with his two daughters, for he was afraid to dwell in Zoar; and he and his two daughters lived in a cave.

31 And the older one said to the younger, "Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to consort with us [couple with us—CS' come into us—EF] in the way of all the world.

32 Come, let us make our father drink wine, and let us lie with him, that we may maintain life through our father."

THE BIRTH OF MOAB AND AMMON (verses 30–38)

Behind this strange narrative lie some authentic historical memories. Since throughout most of their common history relations between Israel and these peoples were generally unfriendly, it is unlikely that a tradition about their kinship to Israel would be invented. By the same token, their connection with Lot must be genuine and is independently confirmed by their appellation "sons of Lot" in Deuteronomy 2.9, 19 and Psalms 83.9. The portrayal of Ammon and Moab as brothers, as in Deuteronomy 23.3, must reflect either an original common descent or a period when the two peoples were united by treaty obligations.

Moabite and Ammonite inscriptions confirm that they both spoke kindred Semitic languages that were much closer to Hebrew than to Aramaic.

It is difficult to understand the point of this episode since neither people plays any role in the patriarchal narrative. A theory that it expresses Israelite contempt for its traditional enemies is hardly likely to be correct. If this were the motivation, then surely a scandalous origin for Esau-Edom, the inveterate and implacable national enemy, would also have been invented, rather than have him be the son of Isaac and Rebekah. Nothing in our story suggests hostility. The daughters do not act out of lust. Lot, who is entirely unaware of what is happening, receives no blame. The later hostility to Moab and Ammon finds expression in the law prohibiting Israelite intermarriage with them, but the proscription in Deuteronomy 23.4f. is conditioned on Israel's wilderness experience, not on the incestuous origin of these peoples. Indeed, their right to live peaceably in their respective homelands is acknowledged as God-given in Deuteronomy. It should also be remembered that King David is descended from a Moabite woman, a fact clearly attested in Ruth 4.17-22.

30–31 We do not know why Lot was afraid to stay in Zoar. Perhaps earth tremors continued to be felt there. Later Jewish sources have preserved a tradition that all five cities—including Zoar—were destroyed. This would explain why Lot's daughters believed the catastrophe to be universal.

32. drink wine The implication is that Lot would never have been a conscious partner to such an act.

maintain life There is no way of knowing if their intent was the renewal of the entire human race, or just the perpetuation of their father's name. There is no explicit condemnation of the actions of the two girls; but their anonymity implies censure.

33 That night they made their father drink wine, and the older one went in and lay with her father; he did not know when she lay down or when she rose.

34 The next day the older one said to the younger, "See, I lay with Father last night; let us make him drink wine tonight also, and you go and lie with him, that we may maintain life through our father."

35 That night also they made their father drink wine, and the younger one went and lay with him; he did not know when she lay down or when she rose.

36 Thus the two daughters of Lot came to be with child by their father.

37 The older one bore a son and named him Moab [Mo'av/By Father—EF]; he is the father of the Moabites of today.

38 And the younger also bore a son, and she called him Ben-ammi [lit. son of my (paternal) kindred]; he is the father of the Ammonites of today.

Chapter 20

1 Abraham journeyed from there to the region of the Negev and settled between Kadesh and Shur. While he was sojourning in Gerar,

37. Moab *A* popular etymology based on Hebrew *me-'avi*, "from [my] father."

38. Ben-ammi Literally, "son of my [paternal] kinsman." The name reflects the fact that the Ammonites are generally called in the Tanach *b'nei-ammon*, a form that also appears in the first complete Ammonite inscription that has turned up. The two sons are born, and nothing more is heard of Lot. His story ends on an inglorious and ironic note. At the beginning of the chapter, he was willing to let the virginity of his daughters be forcibly defiled, without even informing them, in order to save lives. Now, in order to "maintain life," his daughters have lost their virginity by forcing themselves upon him without his knowledge.

CHAPTER 20

***Abraham, Sarah, and Abimelech* (20:1–21:34)**

This chapter is closely connected with the preceding. The opening phrase presupposes a knowledge of Abraham's residence at Mamre-Hebron; the maltreatment of the alien, characteristic of the Sodomites, is feared to prevail at Gerar, as well; the willingness to trade a close female relative in a desperate bid for physical safety is a motif common to both stories; the questioning of the nature of divine justice is the theme of Abimelech's dialogue with God as it was with Abraham's. And, just as Lot was saved by the merit of Abraham, so is the king of Gerar. The patriarch plays the role of intercessor in both narratives.

THE KIDNAPPING OF SARAH (verses 1-2)

1. Abraham journeyed from there This phrase must refer to the district of Mamre-Hebron, which has been Abraham's sole place of domicile since Lot's separation.

Kadesh and Shur The line between the oasis of Kadesh and the Egyptian defense wall in the eastern Delta of the Nile constituted the southernmost limits of Abraham's wanderings. He "settled," that is, made a prolonged stay, in this region.

2 Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." So King Abimelech of Gerar had Sarah brought to him.

3 But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, "You are to die [you're dead—REF; You are a dead man—RA; you must die—EF] because of the woman that you have taken, for she is a married woman."

4 Now Abimelech had not approached her. He said, "O Lord, will You slay people even though innocent?

5 He himself said to me, 'She is my sister!' And she also said, 'He is my brother.' When I did this, my heart was blameless and my hands were clean [With a pure heart and with clean hands I have done this—RA]."

6 And God said to him in the dream, "I knew that you did this with a blameless [pure—RA] heart, and so I kept you from sinning [offending—RA] against Me. That was why I did not let you touch her.

2. Forewarned by his previous experience on alien soil, as described in 12:10-20f., Abraham now takes the initiative in passing off Sarah as his sister. He does not ask her for permission to do so.

Abimelech This is a fairly common ancient West Semitic personal name. It appears as *abmlk* in the Ugaritic texts and as *abimilki*, king of Tyre, in the El-Amarna correspondence (second half 14th cent. B.C.E.). It also appears as an Israelite name that means "my father is king."

had Sarah brought to him She is now nearly 90 years of age! What interest, then, did Abimelech have in her? According to rabbinic fancy, "her flesh was rejuvenated, her wrinkles smoothed out, and her original beauty was restored" (BT Bava M'tzia 87a). Without doubt, from the Narrator's point of view, this would be consistent with the miraculous renewal of her vitality by divine grace so that she may bear a child. However, on this occasion the text is pointedly silent about Sarah's beauty. In light of the subsequent relations between Abraham and Abimelech (21:22-32), it is quite possible that the king's goal was an alliance with the patriarch for purposes of prestige and economic advantage.

3. in a dream Throughout the ancient world, Israel included, the dream was accepted as a vehicle of divine communication. Here it has a straightforward, admonitory function, as in 31.24, and no interpreter is needed.

4. approached her A euphemism for sexual relations. In accordance with the narrative technique, the reason for Abimelech's abstention is withheld here and revealed only later (verse 6).

O Lord *Adonai* is used, and not the divine Name, probably because the king is not of the Abrahamic faith.

will You slay… Like Abraham in the preceding story, the king appeals to God's justice.

people That is, my household (cf. verses 7, 17f.). Hebrew *goy* usually means "nation," but on rare occasions it has the more restricted sense of "people," "folk," or "group." The literal rendering "nation" cannot be ruled out, however, because according to the widespread conception of the times, the monarch and his people constituted a unified entity. The king was regarded as embodying divine blessing, and the well-being of his people was directly dependent upon his personal welfare (cf. verse 9, "upon me and my kingdom").

7 Therefore, restore the man's wife—since he is a prophet, he will intercede for you—to save your life. If you fail to restore her, know that you shall die, you and all that are yours."

8 Early next morning, Abimelech called his servants and told them all that had happened; and the men were greatly frightened.

9 Then Abimelech summoned Abraham and said to him, "What have you done to us? What wrong have I done that you should bring so great a guilt upon me and my kingdom? You have done to me things that ought not to be done.

10 What, then," Abimelech demanded of Abraham, "was your purpose in doing this thing?" ["What did you see, that you did this things?"—REF; "What did you imagine when you did this thing?"—RA; what did you foresee—EF]

7. he is a prophet Hebrew *navi* is used here in the Tanach for the first time. A term of uncertain origin, it is widely believed to be connected with Akkadian *nabû*, "to call." Assyrian kings were entitled "the one called," that is, called by the gods. The form *navi'* in Hebrew could either signify "one who receives the (divine) call" or "one who proclaims," a "spokesman." The last meaning is favored by such texts as Exodus 4.15f. and 7.1, and generally by the prophetic role as described in the Tanach. The prophet is the spokesman for God to man; but intercession before God in favor of man is also an indispensable aspect of his function. Moses frequently acts in this capacity, and so do Samuel, Amos, and Jeremiah. It is primarily in this sense that Abraham is here designated "a prophet." He has already demonstrated his intercessory role in the case of Sodom. In addition, like the later prophets, he has been made privy to God's purposes.

he will intercede for you By forcibly abducting Sarah, Abimelech has made Abraham an aggrieved party. It is only fitting that the one wronged should intercede in behalf of the wrongdoer. Moses similarly prayed for his sister Miriam, who had defamed him, and Job beseeched God on behalf of his three friends who had misjudged him.

you shall die The excuse of inadvertence will no longer be tenable.

9. so great a guilt Literally, "a great sin," a phrase that reflects ancient Near Eastern legal terminology found in Akkadian documents from Ugarit and in Egyptian marriage contracts. The "great sin" is adultery. All four other biblical occurrences of the term appear in reference to idolatry (Exodus 32.21, 30f; 2 Kings 17.21), for which the text often uses the metaphor of marital infidelity.

11 "I thought," said Abraham, "surely there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.

12 And besides, she is in truth my sister, my father's daughter though not my mother's; and she became my wife.

13 So when God made me wander from my father's house, I said to her, 'Let this be the kindness that you shall do me: whatever place we come to, say there of me: He is my brother.'"

14 Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves, and gave them to Abraham; and he restored his wife Sarah to him.

15 And Abimelech said, "Here, my land is before you; settle wherever you please."

11. In a situation where no legal sanction or reward is enforceable, the ultimate restraint on evil, as well as the supreme incentive for good, is the consciousness of the existence of a higher power who demands certain standards of conduct. With the assumption that no such "fear of God" was present in Gerar, Abraham believed that the king would have him killed in order to avoid committing adultery. This would be a far graver offense to him than the murder of the husband who was an alien and so outside the protection of the law.

The phrase "fear (of) God" is used overwhelmingly in connection with situations that involve norms of moral or ethical conduct. Its application is universal, transcending religious or national divisions. It is not synonymous with conscience for, by definition, the desired norms of conduct are conceived as being God-given rather than deriving from any presumed, intuitive discrimination of right and wrong.

12. she is in truth my sister This excuse undoubtedly reflects a sensitivity to resorting to falsehood, even in self-defense. Still, the statement itself must be factual, as well as a tradition of great antiquity. It is inconceivable that a late author would invent a tale ascribing to the patriarch a practice abhorrent to the sexual morality of Israel as it found legal expression in the Torah codes (Leviticus 18.9,11; 20.17; Deuteronomy 27.22); otherwise, we are led to the preposterous assumption that an incestuous marriage was a lesser offense than falsehood in the eyes of the biblical Narrator.

my father's daughter though not my mother's While abhorrence of incest is nearly universal, the definition of prohibited kinship marriage varies widely among societies. Where descent is traced solely through one parent, mating between half-siblings is often socially acceptable and is not considered consanguineous. The story of Amnon and Tamar in 2 Samuel 13.13 and the fulminations of Ezekiel 22.11 show that such a practice persisted in Israel despite the law.

13. whatever place The danger was seen as a recurring one. The kidnapping of women for the royal harem was feared to be widespread and customary, not an exceptional experience. No special insult to Abimelech was intended.

He is my brother The absence of children would lend credence to her claim.

15. settle No longer will he be an alien in Abimelech's realm. 20:9

16 And to Sarah he said, "I herewith give your brother a thousand pieces of silver; this will serve you as vindication [lit. and REF "a covering of the eyes"; meaning of latter half of verse uncertain—JPS; as a shield against censorious eyes—RA; it testifies to your unblemished virtue—CS] before all who are with you, and you are cleared before everyone [you are now publicly vindicated—EF]."

17 Abraham then prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his slave girls, so that they bore children;

18 for the Lord had closed fast every womb of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, the wife of Abraham.

Chapter 21

1 The Lord took note of Sarah [singled out—RA] as He had promised, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken.

2 Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken.

3 Abraham gave his newborn son, whom Sarah had borne him, the name of Isaac [Yitzchak/he Laughs—EF].

16. your brother The king may be using the term sarcastically or simply going along with the pretense because Sarah, presumably, knows nothing of his dreams and of his altercation with Abraham.

a thousand pieces of silver Either the worth of the gifts listed in verse 14 or a separate award to Sarah.

vindication Hebrew *k'sut 'einayim*, literally "a covering of eyes," is a unique phrase of uncertain meaning. Taken literally, it could be a recommendation that in the future Sarah should not appear in public with uncovered face so that her beauty will not be a temptation to men. Interpreted figuratively, the phrase tells us that the payment is a recognition that Sarah's honor was not violated, and so the eyes of others are henceforth closed to what has occurred and she will not be an object of scorn. It is quite likely that some ancient legal formula, not yet discovered, is being used here.

[WGP] ***17. Abraham then prayed.*** While he probably prayed previously, this is the first mention of prayer in the Torah. In early cuneiform sources, too, individual prayer is rarely mentioned and seems to have evolved rather slowly. The development of personal prayer in Mesopotamia has been traced from the early letters to the deity to a fixed poetic form much like the individual laments of the biblical Psalter.

CHAPTER 21

[NS] This chapter consists of three separate episodes. The first, verses 1-7, deals with the birth of Isaac; the second, 8–21, describes the disruptive events in the patriarch's family that led to the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael; and the third, 22–34, tells of relationships between Abraham and the Philistine king Abimelech

The first two episodes form a unit, the one flowing smoothly into the other even though they are separated by a span of a few years.

The last incident presupposes a knowledge of the previous encounter between Abraham and Abimelech. It assumes that the reader knows who Abimelech is and that he has treated Abraham decently.

In light of the close connection between chapters 20 and 21:22-34, the first two stories would appear to be intrusive. Yet a closer look reveals that their present position is intentional and purposeful. The relief of Sarah's infertility through the birth of a son is juxtaposed with the removal of the infirmity that afflicted Abimelech's household, thereby enabling the women to give birth (20.17f). This close association of motifs is underscored by the use of the name Sarah to close the preceding chapter and to open the present one. Finally, the action of both the second and third episodes centers around a well in the Beer-sheba area.

4 And when his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God had commanded him.

5 Now Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

6 Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with [for—REF, MSS; at—RA] me."

7 And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham That Sarah would suckle children! Yet I have borne a son in his old age."

8 The child grew up and was weaned, and Abraham held a great feast [drinking-feast—EF] on the day that Isaac was weaned.

9 Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing [laughing—EF, RA; fooling around—REF].

10 She said to Abraham, "Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."

THE BIRTH OF ISAAC (verses 1-7)

A full quarter of a century has passed since Abraham first heard the divine call promising him great posterity (12.4; 21.5). Now, at last, God's word comes to fruition. The birth of Isaac thus marks a new and momentous stage in the unfolding plan of history. The multiplicity of descriptive terms for the event in verses 1-2 further emphasizes its extraordinary nature.

4. eight days old He is the first person reported to have been so circumcised. This fact emphasizes his role as the one true heir to the Abrahamic covenant. His spiritual destiny is thereby distinguished from that of Ishmael who was circumcised at the age of thirteen (17:25).

6. The laughter is now joyous, in contrast to the earlier laugh of skepticism recorded in 17.17 and 18.12ff.

8. was weaned The age at which infants are weaned varies in different societies. In Egypt and Assyria, breast-feeding often lasted three years; similarly in Israel, at least in Second Temple times. One rabbinic statement limits the practice to 24 months, while another mentions a period of four or five years (BT Ketubot 60a). Because lactation delays the onset of menstruation, the prolongation of nursing was widely used as a contraceptive technique. Weaning marked the completion of the first significant stage in the life cycle of the infant and was therefore a festive occasion.

9. playing He was either amusing himself or playing with Isaac. One rabbinic interpretation of Hebrew *m'etzachek* has Ishmael ridiculing the fuss made of Isaac and asserting his own claim to first-born status with its right to a double share of the paternal estate.

10. The legal position of Ishmael is quite clear. Sarah had undertaken to recognize as her own the male offspring of the union of Abraham with Hagar, a match that she herself had initiated and imposed on her husband (16.2). Abraham, for his part, undoubtedly recognized Ishmael as his legitimate son, a fact repeatedly attested by a variety of earlier texts and affirmed here (verse 11) as well as later on (25.9,12). The laws of Hammurabi (par. 170f.) and of the still earlier Lipit-Ishtar (par. 25) implicitly make inheritance rights a legal consequence of the father's acceptance of the infant as his legitimate son. There is no doubt that Ishmael was entitled to a share of Abraham's estate. The key to Sarah's demand lies in a clause in the laws of Lipit-Ishtar where it is stipulated that the father may grant freedom to the slave woman and the children she has borne him, in which case they forfeit their share of the paternal property (cf. Judges 11.1-3). Sarah is asking Abraham to exercise that legal right (cf. 25.6).

[RA] ***Cast out that slave woman*** In language that catches the indignation of the legitimate wife, Sarah refers to neither Hagar nor Ishmael by name, but instead insists on the designation of low social status.

11 The matter distressed Abraham greatly [was exceedingly bad in Avraham's eyes—EF; seemed evil in Abraham's eyes—RA; was very bad—REF; grieved him greatly—CS], for it concerned a son of his.

12 But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed over [Do not let it be bad in your eyes concerning—EF] the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued [lit. called] for you [through Isaac shall your seed be acclaimed—RA].

13 As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your seed."

14 Early next morning Abraham took some bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar. He placed them over her shoulder, together with the child, and sent her away. [took bread and a waterskin and handed them to Hagar, placing them and the boy on her shoulder—CS; took bread and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar, placing them on her shoulder, and he gave her the child, and sent her away—RA; took bread and a bottle of water and gave to Hagar—he put them on her shoulder—and the boy] And she wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

15 When the water was gone from the skin, she left the child under one of the bushes,

16 and went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away; for she thought, "Let me not look on as the child dies." And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears.

17 God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is.

18 Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him."

19 Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink.

20 God was with the boy and he grew up; he dwelt in the wilderness and became a [seasoned—RA] bowman.

[NS] ***11.*** Fatherly love and moral considerations deter Abraham from giving his consent.

12-13. The Narrator feels it necessary for God to justify His actions so as to remove any suggestion of moral taint. He does so on two grounds: The line of Abraham is to be continued solely through Isaac; Hagar and her son will not be left to an uncertain fate in the wilderness, for a great future awaits Ishmael. There is a delicate shift here from Sarah's motivation to God's. Her sole interest is to safeguard her son's inheritance. God is concerned with the question of posterity and His ultimate purposes.

12. God said to Abraham Apparently in a night vision, since it is at once followed by "early next morning."

15. When the water was gone Had she not lost her way, her original supplies would have been adequate.

17. God heard That is, heeded. The phrase is equivalent to the meaning of the name Ishmael.

called to Hagar from heaven Both sons of Abraham are saved at a critical moment by an angelic "voice from heaven" (cf. 22.11).

19. opened her eyes She suddenly becomes aware of the existence of the well.

20. a bowman The tradition that the Ishmaelites were professional marksmen is preserved in Isaiah 21.17, which speaks of the bows of Kedar's warriors. Kedar is a son of Ishmael in the list of Genesis 25.13.

21 He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

22 At that time Abimelech and Phicol, chief of his troops, said to Abraham, "God is with you in everything that you do.

23 Therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my kith and kin, but will deal with me and with the land in which you have sojourned as loyally as I have dealt with you."

24 And Abraham said, "I swear it."

25 Then Abraham reproached [criticized—REF] Abimelech for the well of water which the servants of Abimelech had seized.

26 But Abimelech said, "I do not know who did this; you did not tell me, nor have I heard of it until today."

27 Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two of them made a pact [cut a covenant—EF; made a covenant—REF; forged a treaty—CS].

28 Abraham then set seven ewes of the flock by themselves,

ABRAHAM'S PACT WITH ABIMELECH (verses 22–34)

Abraham's encounter with Abimelech is reported with such an economy of detail that the background is obscure. Clearly, it is told not for its own sake but for other reasons. It projects a fresh image of the patriarch. Now that his life's dream is fulfilled and his posterity assured, he possesses a new sense of confidence. No longer does he exhibit timidity and evasiveness in dealing with royalty; he negotiates as an equal. Moreover, Abraham reaches a new stage in his relationship to the promised land. He makes his first acquisition—a well at Beer-sheba—and his rights are acknowledged and guaranteed by the king. Finally, the narrative provides folk etymology for the name Beer-sheba and an explanation of its origin as a cult center in Israel.

Despite its paucity of detail, the composition of this story, like the previous two in the chapter, is artful. Each of the names of the two principal characters, Abraham and Abimelech, occurs exactly seven times; there are seven ewe lambs; both the verb "to swear" (verses 23f.) and the name Beer-sheba contain the same Hebrew stem as the word for "seven" (*sh-v-a*).

22. Abimelech His royal title is deliberately omitted in order to underline that he and Abraham are equals.

Phicol The presence of the army commander suggests a military expedition.

said to Abraham The ensuing details make clear that the entire action takes place in the Beer-sheba region. Hence, Abraham must have left Gerar for this place after the episode recounted in Genesis 20.

God is with you An acknowledgment of Abraham's success and power.

23. deal falsely Hebrew *tishkor.* What Abimelech is suggesting is a pact of mutual nonaggression.

24. I swear it The laconic reply suggests that Abraham has something on his mind.

25. seized Hebrew *g-z-l*, "to rob," can be used of real estate. They had prevented Abraham from enjoying free access to water for his herds.

27. It is possible that the beasts are part of the pact-making ceremony.

29 and Abimelech said to Abraham, "What mean these seven ewes which you have set apart?"

30 He replied, "You are to accept these seven ewes from me as proof that I dug this well."

31 Hence that place was called Beer-sheba ["well of seven" or "well of oath"], for there the two of them swore an oath.

32 When they had concluded the pact at Beer-sheba, Abimelech and Phicol, chief of his troops, departed and returned to the land of the Philistines.

33 [Abraham] planted a tamarisk at Beer-sheba, and invoked there the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God [God of the Ages—EF; Adonai, El Olam—REF].

34 And Abraham resided in the land of the Philistines a long time.

29-31. The seven ewes are obviously not part of the traditional ceremony but a separate transaction. By accepting them as a gift, the king publicly acknowledges Abraham's ownership of the well.

31. Beer-sheba The name can mean either "well of oath" or "well of seven." Our narrative, as does the parallel story in connection with Isaac (Gen. 26.23-33), fuses both meanings.

the Everlasting God Hebrew *'el 'olam* as a divine epithet is unique in the Tanach. It provides an excellent illustration of the way in which a pre-Israelite liturgical term has undergone a monotheistic transformation. El was the name of the god who was head of the Canaanite pantheon. The Ugaritic texts stress his antiquity and eternity, and the title *'el d-u 'olam*, "El the eternal one," has turned up in a 15th-century B.C.E. inscription from the hand of a Canaanite miner in the Sinai Peninsula. However, Hebrew does not allow the use of a proper name in the construct state joined to a noun. Hence, *'el* in the phrase *'el 'olam* can no longer be the proper name of a god but means simply "God." The phrase has become an attribute or epithet of Adonai, "the Everlasting God."

[RA] ***the land of the Philistines*** This is an often-noted anachronism, the incursion of the Philistines from Crete to the coastal area of Canaan postdating the patriarchal period by more than four centuries. The writer may mean merely to refer casually to this region in geographical terms familiar to his audience; it is not clear that Abimelech with his Semitic name is meant to be thought of as a "Philistine" king.

33. a tamarisk The cultic tree is planted "at" rather than "in" Beersheba because it is evident that the site of the oath is a well in the wilderness, not a built-up town.

[REF[One way to understand Abraham's silence

Abraham fights for the lives of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, but not for the life of Isaac. That is a strange fact itself, and then these two stories are juxtaposed by being placed in the same parashah, so that they are regularly read together, which makes the ironic relationship between them even harder to ignore. When God tells Abraham what He plans, Abraham's response is to be the first human in the Bible's story to challenge a divine decision. But when God tells him, "Take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac...and offer him as a burnt offering," the report is: "And Abraham got up early in the morning"!

The text does not tell us what Abraham's motive is for questioning God about the fate of Sodom. Even if it is mainly his concern for Lot, still that's a nephew; Isaac is his son! Even if it is his compassion for those immoral people of Sodom, still, there must also be compassion for his son. And if it is his sense of justice, is there less of a case for justice in sacrificing an innocent Isaac than in the destruction of those very guilty people?

One possible answer: The mark of Abraham's personality is obedience to God. Leave your land. Leave your birthplace. Leave your father's house. Circumcise yourself. Even if he is commanded to sacrifice his child, he will do it. There are no arguments or even questions. There is only immediate compliance. But the case of Sodom and Gomorrah is different becauseAbraham is not commanded to do anything. Whatever reasons one imagines for God to tell Abraham about this, the fact is that by informing Abraham of the divine intention to look into the situation in Sodom and Gomorrah, God opens the door for Abraham to speak up. Commands, on the other hand, leave no room for discussion.

A second answer (*davar acher*): The reason Abraham speaks up for the more distant relative and for all the unrelated populace of Sodom and Gomorrah, but not for his own son, is precisely because it is his son. He is sufficiently distant from Lot and the populace of Sodom that he is in a position to argue whether their destruction would be just. But in the case of Isaac, he is not an unbiased observer. He has an intensely personal interest in the matter. As such, he does not have the same standing to argue the justice or injustice of the case.

A third answer (*davar acher*): The outcome of the Sodom and Gomorrah matter itself is what causes Abraham to stay silent now. In the dialogue between God and Abraham over the fate of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, the exchange is subtle as God responds not merely to what Abraham says, but apparently to what is in Abraham's heart. Thus. when Abraham learns that God means to judge these cities, he says, "Maybe there are 50 virtuous people within the city" (18.24). God responds, "If I find in Sodom 50 virtuous people within the city. then I'll sustain the whole place for their sake" (18.26). Abraham's next bargaining position will be the sparing of the place for 45 righteous, but he articulates his question in such a way as to make it seem a small request. He does not say 45. He says. "Maybe the 50 virtuous people will be short by five. Will you destroy the whole city for the five!" To which God replies. "I won't destroy if I find 45 there."

Thus, God would appear to be conveying to Abraham that there is not much point to being cagey in one's words when one is arguing with someone who is omniscient. After this, Abraham words his positions more straightforwardly. He gets the message that he may as well say directly what is on his mind because that is what is going to be responded to in any case.

Even then, Abraham succeeds in getting down to 10. God agrees to sustain the cities for 10 virtuous people. But not even 10 are to be found, and the cities are destroyed. So even though Abraham's dialogue with God is important in several ways—including: it provides Abraham with an opportunity to articulate the principle of justice for future generations, and it is an important step in the growth of humankind's independence and development of responsibility—the fact remains that nothing is changed for Sodom and Gomorrah by this.

Abraham learns that, since God knows what is in one's heart. why argue? Since God knows the situation and its necessary outcome, why speak? After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham never argues with God again. Moses will argue with God, Jonah will, Jeremiah will, but not Abraham. When the creator tells Abraham to listen to Sarah and send Hagar and Ishmael away, "Abraham got up early in the morning" (21.14). When the creator tells him to sacrifice his son, "Abraham got up early in the morning" (22.3).

But Abraham's obedience is what saves Isaac in the end. What an irony. Abraham's silence over Isaac is more effective than his argument over Sodom and Gomorrah.

Chapter 22

1 Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, "Abraham," and he answered, "Here I am."

2 And He said, "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love [your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac—REF, MSS], and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you."

CHAPTER 22

[NS] ***1. God put Abraham to the test*** This information is imparted to the reader, not divulged to Abraham, in order to remove any possible misunderstanding that God requires human sacrifice as such.

Here I am Hebrew *hineni* is the only word Abraham utters to God in the entire episode.

2. The enormity of God's request and the agonizing nature of the decision to be made are conveyed through the cumulative effect of the descriptive terms set forth in ascending order of endearment. This is the same device used in God's first call to Abraham in 12.1.

[REF] Take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac. If the issue were only a matter of identification, just the name Isaac is sufficient; but the issue is the test. The fourfold, heartrending identification creates background for all that is to come. Now Abraham's unquestioning obedience is understood against this background: "your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac." The otherwise minor temporal note that "Abraham got up early in the morning" to do the deed becomes a fact worthy of wonder and interpretation against the background of "your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac." The notation that he puts the wood on Isaac himself to carry becomes an ironic image. Abraham's words to the servants—"I and the boy, we'll go over there, and we'll bow, and we'll come back to you"—become not only enigmatic but emotionally charged. (Does his saying "we'll come back" suggest extraordinary faith? One last hope? Or is it constructed so as not to frighten Isaac?) The words of the dialogue between father and son become charged by this background, as well, as Isaac adds the phrase "my father" in his question addressed to Abraham, and Abraham adds "my son" in each sentence in response. (The words "son" and "father" occur 12 times in the story and are, in almost every case, unnecessary.) The dialogue moreover begins and ends with "and the two of them went together," another mundane phrase turned into a remarkable one.

Most remarkable of all is the exchange between Abraham and Isaac over the obvious absence of an animal to be sacrificed. To appreciate the artistry of the wording of Abraham 's answer, we must keep in mind that the Hebrew has no punctuation. The text says. "God will see to the sheep for the burnt offering my son," which can be understood in two ways. The last two words can be read as "God will see to the sheep for the burnt offering, my son." But they can also be read as a tearful irony—"'God will see to the sheep for the burnt offering: my son"—subtly conveying the truth that Isaac himself is to be the sheep for the sacrifice.

The denouement of the story, in which Isaac is spared, is no less charged by all of this expressed and unexpressed background. Indeed. Abraham's feelings (relief? gratitude? reverence? confusion?) are likewise not a part of the narrative. There is, rather, a reminiscence of the original wording, as God twice says to Abraham that now all is well because "You didn't hold back your son, your only son." As biblical interpreters noted centuries ago, the wording suggests that the reward at the end is in proportion to the difficulty of the test as expressed al the beginning.

[RA] The classical Midrash, followed by Rashi, beautifully catches the resonance of the order of terms. Rashi's concise version is as follows: "Your son: He said to Him, 'I have two sons.' He said to him, 'Your only one.' He said, This one is an only one to his mother and this one is an only one to his mother.' He said to him, Whom you love.' He said to him 'I love both of them.' He said to him, Isaac." Although Abraham does not actually speak in the biblical text, this midrashic dialogue demonstrates a fine responsiveness to how the tense stance of the addressee is intimated through the words of the addresser in a one-sided dialogue.

3 So early next morning, Abraham saddled his jackass and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place of which God had told him.

4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar.

5 Then Abraham said to his servants, "You stay here with the jackass. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship [we'll bow—REF] and we will return to you."

6 Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone [fire—REF, RA, MSS] and the knife [cleaver—RA]; and the two walked off together.

7 Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he answered, "Yes, my son." And he said, "Here are the firestone [fire—REF, RA, MSS] and the wood; but where is the sheep [lamb—CS] for the burnt offering?"

[NS] ***3.*** The patriarch, who was so daringly eloquent on behalf of the people of Sodom, surrenders in total silence to his own bitter personal destiny. He does not question divine constancy. Early next morning, he performs a series of preparatory acts all described with an economy of words appropriate to the somber silence that pervades the scene. Remarkably, Sarah is ignored throughout the chapter. Early exegesis has Abraham concealing from his wife the true purpose of his journey lest she hinder him from doing God's bidding.

two of his servants An eminent personage would be accompanied by two attendants.

He split the wood Since the destination is as yet unknown to him, he cannot be sure he will find fuel there.

4. On the third day The long interval is crucial to the trial of faith, for Abraham's instantaneous assent to God's request may have been impulsive and emotional, and without proper consideration. The long trek enables him to regain his composure. It allows time for sober reflection; yet his resolve is not weakened. His decision to obey God is thus seen to be an undoubting act of free will.

saw the place from afar Is it an existing sacred site, or does he instinctively know the spot? The sight of it "from afar" immediately stirs consciousness of the actuality of the impending horror. According to rabbinic legend, Abraham and Isaac, but not the attendants, saw a cloud hovering over one of the hills.

5. we will return Use of the plural form conceals the true purpose of the journey from Isaac.

6. Abraham took the wood He himself carried the dangerous articles—the firestone and the knife—so that the boy not be harmed and the sacrificial victim be unblemished at the moment of slaughter. There is a touch of bitter irony here: Isaac, unaware, cooperates in carrying some of the instruments of his own destruction. He whose name means "laughter" appears to be on the verge of becoming the personification of tragedy.

firestone Since it is considered unlikely that a flame would be carried for three days, this seems a more likely rendering than "fire." It could also mean a brazier.

knife A large and heavy implement is intended, not an ordinary knife.

the two walked off together There is perfect rapport between the two. The tension between the unsuspecting innocence of the son and the unuttered agony of the father does not disturb the harmony.

7-8. The oppressive silence is broken by Isaac's simple query, which is at once artless and penetrating. Is a suspicion of the awful truth beginning to dawn upon the boy? If so, the father's equivocal reply must surely sustain whatever doubts there are, especially in an age when human sacrifice is possible. The poignant tension inherent in the situation is heightened by the repetition of the words "father" and "son." The bond between the two remains unbroken. The brief dialogue over—the only such recorded between Isaac and his father—they continue their fateful trek in perfect harmony.

8 And Abraham said, "God will see to the sheep [lamb—CS] for His burnt offering, my son." And the two of them walked on together.

9 They arrived at the place of which God had told him. Abraham built an altar there; he laid out the wood, bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood.

10 And Abraham picked up the knife [cleaver—RA] to slay his son.

11 Then an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven: "Abraham! Abraham!" And he answered, "Here I am."

9-10. The detailed, laconic description of the various preparatory procedures conveys something of the eternity of that terrible moment in time before the angelic voice is heard. Once again, not a word escapes the father's lips. Isaac too is speechless. The intensity of the anguish is beyond the ability of words to express.

[WGP] ***9.*** Note the staccato phrasing that heighten the tension. Abraham seems to move "like a sleepwalker."

[NS] ***bound*** The Hebrew stem *a-k-d (ע-ק-ד)* is found nowhere else in the ritual vocabulary of the Tanach. In postbiblical texts it is a technical term for the tying together of the forefoot and the hindfoot of an animal or of the two forefeet or two hindfeet.

11. called to him from heaven Angels need to travel between heaven and earth, as is clear from 28.12, as well as from place to place on earth, as proved by 18.22. But the critical urgency of the moment precludes their usual personal appearance, such as made to Hagar (16.7ff.), and dictates this exceptional mode of angelic intervention.

***Abraham*! *Abraham*!** The repetition connotes both urgency and a special relationship between the one addressed and the One who calls.

12 And he said, "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me."

13 When Abraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns [could see a ram (just) after it was caught by its horns in a thicket—CS]. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son.

14 And Abraham named that site *Adonai-yireh* [lit. the Lord will see] whence the present saying, "On the mount of the Lord there is vision" [b'har Adonai yir-eh; In Adonai's mountain it will be seen—REF; On the mount of the Lord there is sight—RA; On the mount of the Eternal, (God) will be seen—CS]

12. And he said In biblical angelology, God and His angels often interchange imperceptibly.

for now I know As Ramban points out, it is not that God's foreknowledge is wanting but that, for Abraham's sake, the quality of character that now exists only potentially must be actualized. In the biblical view, the genuinely righteous man must deserve that status through demonstrated action. Henceforth, Abraham is the incontestable paradigm of the truly "God-fearing" man, one who is wholehearted in his self-determined, disinterested, self-surrender to God's will. It is not important that the act was unfulfilled, for the value of the act may lie as much in the inward intention of the doer as in the final execution. Abraham interprets the fortuitous presence of a ram to mean that a substitute animal offering is desired in place of Isaac.

13. a ram Hebrew *'ayil 'echad*, literally "one ram." This is the reading underlying many ancient versions, as well as of several medieval manuscripts. Our printed editions read *'ayil 'achar*, as did a few other ancient renderings. This text is taken to mean "a ram behind [him]" or "a ram, later [caught]." This incident reminds Abraham of his reply to Isaac's question (verse 7f.). He had foretold better than he realized at the time. In accordance with patriarchal practice, the site of a revelation becomes sacred and receives a name somehow reminiscent of the occasion.

[WGP] The ram occupied an important place in ancient Israel's sacrificial cult (for example, Lev. 5:15-18; 19:21; Num. 5:8; 6:17). The image of a ram caught in the thicket was known in Ur, where archeologists have found two Sumerian statues depicting the animal tied to a bush. A similar substitutional offering is portrayed in Greek mythology.

[REF] Some manuscripts read "one" ram, i.e., Hebrew אחד, rather than "behind," Hebrew אחר. "One" makes plainer sense, but this may very well be a case that suggests the principle of *lectio difficilior praeferenda est* (the more difficult reading is preferable). That is, scribes tend to simplify an unusual reading more often than they make a change that turns a simple reading into a more difficult one. The matter remains unsolved.

14. Adonai Yir'eh**,** meaning "Adonai Will See." (Perhaps it should be pointed as Adonai Yera-eh. "Adonai Will Appear," which is how it appears later in the same verse.)

[WGP] ***Adonai Yir'eh.*** Literally, "the Eternal will see" (or, "sees"), but the object is not stated; perhaps "the heart" is meant. When today we read the Hebrew text we do not pronounce the divine name but use the circumlocution "Adonai." But in biblical times God's name was pronounced and was most likely alliterative with *yir'eh*. It meant that Abraham had "seen" God—hence the popular saying quoted in the verse.

[NS] ***whence the present saying*** *A* popular saying arose based on this episode. This is not part of the narrative but an editorial note.

there is vision Literally "He/it shall be seen." The subject of the verb is unclear, although the apparent reference to verse 8 would favor the impersonal rendering, referring to the sheep. A different exegetical tradition is represented by the Septuagint, which renders, "On the mount the Lord appears."

15 The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven,

16 and said, "By Myself I swear, the Lord declares: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one,

17 I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes [your seed will possess its enemies' gate—REF].

18 All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed My command."

19 Abraham then returned to his servants, and they departed together for Beer-sheba; and Abraham stayed in Beer-sheba.

20 Some time later, Abraham was told, "Milcah too has borne children to your brother Nachor:

21 Utz the first-born, and Buz his brother, and Kemuel the father of Aram;

22 and Kesed, Chazo, Pildash, Yidlaph, and Bethuel"—

23 Bethuel being the father of Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nachor, Abraham's brother.

24 And his concubine, whose name was Reumah, also bore children: Tevach, Gacham, Tachash, and Maacah.

The Offspring of Nachor **(verses 20–24)**

These verses set forth the genealogy of Nachor, Abraham's brother. The two explanatory glosses—"Kemuel the father of Aram" and "Bethuel being the father of Rebekah"—suggest that the purpose of the genealogy is to forge a link between the Akedah and chapter 24.

The structure and content of the family tree are of considerable interest for their own sakes. Like the other genealogies in the Book of Genesis, this too echoes historical reality. Nachor's "sons" are 12 in all. Since most of the names are otherwise known as those of tribes or localities, the list actually represents a league of tribes linked to one another by a consciousness of kinship or by confederation. Such tribal federations were common throughout the ancient Semitic world. The number 12 recalls the corresponding organization of the tribes of Ishmael, as mentioned in 17:20 and 25:12–16, and the later tribes of Israel.

20. Milcah too has borne children The phrase is intelligible only in light of the earlier genealogy of 11.29, which mentions Milcah together with Sarah.