

## Expansions on the Book of Genesis, #3

### Chapter Eighteen

“And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day” [vs. 1]. This simple word (‘and’ or *v*) prefaced to the verb *ra’ah* (to see) was noted earlier as an indication of continuous action and has special meaning for Abraham. It serves to tie in a “seeing” by the Lord, one of a number thus far, with which the future patriarch has become very familiar. That is to say, his private thoughts, akin to “here-we-are-again-with-another-divine-promise-not-fulfilled,” caught him at a place where he had built an altar to the Lord: “and he came and dwelt by the oaks of Mamre which are at Hebron” [13.18]. Perhaps by returning to the altar Abraham might renew one of his earlier contacts with the Lord and see what would happen. So here was Abraham sitting at the entrance to his tent staring at the altar with all the earlier memories of divine encounters passing through his mind. Sarah isn’t mentioned but was within the tent; undoubtedly she had similar thoughts of past events and was not pregnant despite a divine promise. Abraham might have quarreled with his wife about all this so decided that the heat outside the tent was better than the heat inside which their argument had produced. Between his building of the altar and the present Abraham had moved about Canaan, sticking pretty close to Mamre; he was almost a hundred years old and not in a position to move about as freely as before. As with earlier appearances, the Lord had to make himself known—seen (*ra’ah*)—quite clearly due to Abraham’s failing eyesight. As for the “door,” the Hebrew *petach* refers to an entrance and not necessarily a physical door, something not associated with a tent.

“Heat of the day” applies to the time between noon and four in the afternoon, a time when desert dwellers seek refuge from the sun. During these mid-afternoon hours mirages appear on the horizon, so Abraham may have thought the Lord appearing to him was such a mirage. The earlier divine appearances at this point must have appeared equivalent to a mirage both to Abraham and Sarah simply because they weren’t fulfilled. They were too elderly to return to Haran and were stuck in this foreign land of Canaan and worst of all, without an heir. In order to make sure Abraham didn’t mistake the appearance for a mirage, the Lord came in the form of three men who “stood in front of him” [vs. 2]. One would have been taken as a mirage and two as seeing double but three was an unmistakable physical presence. First of all, Abraham “lifted up his eyes”...he lifted up his now ancient eyes, barely able to see, a difficulty compounded by the sun shimmering all around him at the hottest time of day. While making this gesture, Abraham “looked” which is the verb *ra’ah* as used in vs. 1, “appeared.” Immediately afterwards comes “behold” or *hineh* which had been noted earlier as applicable to a sudden astonishment. *Hineh* serves to introduce the three visitors who stood “in front of him,” the preposition being *hal* or better, “upon him.” *Hal* gives the impression that Abraham was pressed down and had to raise his eyes (literally) to see them on top of him. Vs. 2 continues with a second sentence: “Abraham ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth.” What was Abraham thinking when he ran? His first thought was to distinguish reality from a mirage, and the running suggests that he favored the first. It was unusual to see people out and about during this time with the sun directly overhead. Bowing to the ground was a customary greeting and in this particular instance, with the shimmering heat and Abraham’s dim vision, acknowledgment that the visitors were no mirage. *Shachah* is the verb at hand and often used for worship of God: “they bowed their heads and worshiped” [Ex 4.31].

Vs. 3 follows as part of the previous verse with “My lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant.” Abraham uses the singular *‘adony* for “lord” despite three men being present. Some Christian commentators say that this applies to the one Lord and three persons of the Trinity but chances are it’s due, as noted above, to the time of day when mirages and reality can be confused easily

with reality. While face down on the ground Abraham bids him...them...not to pass by but to stay. In addition to *shachah* as a sign of respect, it might reveal some fear and doubt concerning the three men. Who would be walking in the desert at the hottest time of day? Secretly Abraham was wishing the men would pass him by and go somewhere else, but desert hospitality compelled him to act otherwise. To play it safe, Abraham bids his unexpected visitors “to rest under the tree.” Sarah was alone inside the tent, and he didn’t want her to be exposed to these suspicious men in case they posed a threat. While Abraham busied himself getting some refreshment, he had one ear cocked to the tree in an attempt to listen in on their conversation but to no avail. They remained silent as where they came from and to where they were going; Abraham complied with their silence and let it go at that. As for his invitation to take some rest, the verb is *sahad* which connotes a propping up or upholding. “You have given me the shield of your salvation and your right hand supported me” [Ps 18.35]. The image fits well, for it’s easy to imagine the three visitors under the tree leaning on their traveling staffs.

Vs. 5 continues with Abraham saying tongue-in-cheek “and after that you may pass on.” In other words, I will take care of you during this the hottest time of day but will be delighted when you leave both me and my wife Sarah. To his relief they said, “Do as you have said.” In other words, prepare us some refreshment after which we will be on our way. That’s why Abraham went to such great lengths at having Sarah and a servant prepare a meal despite the intense heat: cakes, a tender calf, curds and milk. To do this was no mean feat on sudden notice which meant the three men had to wait in the tree’s shade a good part of the afternoon. During that time Abraham kept himself busy—not so much that because others were doing the work—but occupied himself with a feigned busyness so as to avoid contact with his visitors as much as possible. We don’t hear about Hagar nor her son Ishmael at this point who must have been in the vicinity. Hagar could have approached the mysterious visitors and asked if they knew that angel who intervened on her behalf (cf. 16.7). Perhaps it was one of them. Surely one was responsible but wished to keep this secret from Abraham lest he find out and make life miserable for her. As for the hasty preparation of food, it concludes with “he (Abraham) stood by them under the tree while they ate” [vs. 8]. Abraham was hovering over the three men with one eye on the clock, if you will, hoping they would eat quickly and be on their way. By this time it must have been evening, for to arrange the preparations was no mean feat despite the help. Abraham was hoping the men would get on the road and not stay the night which would have made it more inconvenient for him and his wife.

After the rush of preparing food the men came out with some dreaded words: “Where is your wife” [vs. 9]? During this time Sarah was inside the tent listening in on the conversation with an occasional furtive glance outside the covering. She was trapped in the tent for some time, really, and was eager to get out and as her husband details about what was going on. Even though Abraham went inside the tent (vs. 6), it was very quick, just ample time to tell her what to do. Of course, Abraham was in a bind; the men saw him go inside the tent but didn’t realize Sarah was present. Now he was afraid they would enter and do her harm, the time being close to sunset. So after an interval which must have seen a very long time, Abraham was surprised at what happened next. Three men came to visit him but now the text reads (vs. 9), “The Lord said.” Here we have a repetition as in vss. 2-3 (three men and the address ‘My lord’) only now instead of the shimmering heat which Abraham’s failing eyesight could have confused with a mirage, the present form of address remains basically the same. Abraham uses the singular address for three men because it was close to dark meaning that all the time these visitors were under the tree. They were disguised in the shade, for shade and intense desert sunlight can confuse one’s vision. Throughout the duration Abraham didn’t know if he had been serving one or three men. Essentially the same confusion would happen later with his son Isaac when he confused Jacob and Esau, 27.22.

As for this singular lord, he said that he will return in the spring “and Sarah your wife shall have a son” [vs. 10]. The Hebrew for “spring” is *heth chayah*, literally “time of life” or the time when life returns to the earth after the passage of winter and its rains. For Sarah, this phrase intimates more than the coming spring season but the time of birth for her future son so often promised to Abraham by the Lord. This time it was different, a definite time when Sarah will give birth, which was nine months away. However, to the aged Sarah it was long and full of doubt as she “was listening at the tent door behind him” or behind her husband. That means the tent was close to the tree under which the three visitors had rested and took their meal. “So Sarah laughed to herself” [vs. 12]. The verb is *tsachaq* and reflects the same attitude of Abraham in 17.17: “Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed.” However, it intimates the name of his future son, Isaac. “To her self” is *beqirbah*, literally, “in her midst” or deep within herself. Immediately Sarah adds “shall I have pleasure (*hednah*)?” This is the only form in the Bible yet is related to the proper name Eden, *Heden*. “The Lord said, ‘Why did Sarah laugh’” [vs. 13]? A matter-of-fact observation which caught both Abraham and Sarah by surprise, for the Lord thought his statement about Sarah giving birth in the “time of life” to be nothing special. Surely Abraham must have sensed Sarah behind the tent veil listening in on the conversation, even having encouraged her to do so when he popped in briefly to ask her to prepare a meal. With the coming darkness of evening, she was more bold, thinking that the twilight would help disguise her presence from the Lord. “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” Here the Lord is addressing himself, again in that matter-of-fact tone of voice. The Hebrew for “hard” is *pala*’ or “wonderful,” a verb which connotes something being distinguished from something else by reason of its excellency. “Your love to me was wonderful” [2Sam 1.26].

“At the appointed time I will return to you, in the spring, and Sarah shall have a son” [vs. 14]. *Mohed* is the appointed time as in 17.21 (‘at this season next year’) and can apply to an assembly of persons: “the tabernacle of the congregation” [Num 10.3]. Thus *mohed* implies a gathering as well as specific time which will involve Sarah, her new-born son, Abraham, the Lord and others belonging to Abraham’s retinue. In other words, the birth will be a very public occasion to occur *heth chayah* or the “time of life” noted in vs. 14. Sarah’s laughing at the Lord’s prediction is fitting because she will continue to laugh...*tsachaq*...for the next nine months, thereby having a direct impact upon her son being formed in her womb. Even at this earliest stage of conception Isaac resembled John the Baptist in Elizabeth who leapt for joy upon hearing Mary’s voice (cf. Lk 1.44). The difference is that Isaac rejoiced at finally being the first native born son of a generation destined to possess Canaan and later rename it to Israel. As for the Lord, the words spoken in vs. 14 apply directly to her hiding just behind the tent’s veil.

“Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom” [vs. 16]. Not only was Abraham relieved at their departure but so was Sarah after that strange encounter. Once she heard Abraham’s salutations to the men, she knew it was safe to exit the tent and get ready for the night. The verb *qum*, fundamentally as “to arise,” is used for “set out” which was used last in 17.7: “I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants.” Although it doesn’t apply to the situation at hand, the association of *qum* as pertinent to the covenant, so often mentioned with regard to Abraham, does have some significance. With the departure of the mysterious visitors who shift between three persons and one, they are in fact beginning to establish...*qum*...the long-promised covenant. By now it was evening, perhaps on the verge of full night, yet these men had the ability to make their way in darkness. The verb *shaqaph* (looked toward) reveals their determination and often pertains to a looking down or as looking from a window: “Michal the daughter of Saul looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord” [2Sam 6.16]. *Shaqaph* is intensified by the Hebrew for “toward,” *hal peney* (literally, ‘on the face’). Abraham had previous contact with Sodom, rather, the king of that city, who came out with Melchizedek (cf. 14.17). A bit later that king demanded “persons”

(vs. 22) but the then called Abram refused. Abraham must have figured something ominous was about to unfold with respect to Sodom and perhaps had in mind the benign and generous king of Salem, Melchizedek whose presence he missed. This may have formed part of their discussion as Abraham “went with them to set them on their way.” They needed guidance to leave the camp area and get on the road to Sodom, this in the twilight hours.

In vs. 17 there’s a shift to a singular speaker (the Lord) from vs. 16 (‘the men set out’). Such alteration, as had been pointed out, is understandable given Abraham’s dim vision and the semi-darkness of the evening hours. “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?” This question addressed to himself as well as rhetorically continues into the next verse. Just the fact of asking such a question means that the Lord is tempted to blurt out his intent to Abraham. Although on a number of occasions the Lord had promised Abraham that his descendants will become great, here he refers to Abraham himself becoming such, this at ninety-nine years of age, a seemingly impossible task. The Lord continues musing to himself—this as he is about to set off to Sodom—that he will not reveal his intent. Better to have Abraham’s descendants evolve into a “great and mighty nation” instead of swelling him up, if you will, to this status prior to its realization. With respect to this vs. 19 reads “No, I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him.” The Hebrew text has “know” instead of “chosen” (*yadah*) which is more intimate. This divine knowledge is transmitted to future generations by the task set before Abraham, namely, to charge both his children and household. The verb for “charge” is *tsawah* or to order, command. “He will give his angels charge over you” [Ps 91.11]. This statement is unique in that it includes the household which is comprised not of family members but of people like Hagar and Eliezer of Damascus (cf. 15.2). Although closely bound up with Abraham’s family, chances are that never did the two groups intermarry, let alone associate with each other except for necessary chores, etc..

As for the *tsawah* at hand (vs. 19), it consists of two parts, the first “keeping the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice.” The verb at hand is *shamar* which had been noted several times earlier, the first in conjunction with man and his relationship with the garden, a theme easily carried over to a *shamar*...a cultivation...of the Torah: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” [2.15]. In the verse at hand, *shamar* pertains to the “way (*derek*) of the Lord,” this being the common term for a road or highway. Abraham’s experience of *derek* related to things divine was quite problematic, that is, repeated promises in a land not his own. Although Abraham is uniquely qualified for this type of *shamar*, he’s hesitant because not many will be able to hold out as long as he and Sarah had done, including a change of names in their old age. The two qualifications for this are righteousness and justice, more or less equivalent. The next time we see this open-ended type of *shamar* with a long gestation period relative to a nation is when Israel came into Egypt and remained there some four hundred years followed by forty years of wandering in the Sinai desert.

Vs. 20 continues with the singular Lord speaking within the context of the plural men (vs. 16) and changes tone quite abruptly (it continues into vs. 21): “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave.” This is what the Lord wishes to get off his chest to Abraham, not discussing his descendants, something that could turn him off because he heard it repeatedly. By bringing up the wickedness of these two cities—and surely Abraham heard about it, even as early as his uneasy encounter with the king of Sodom (14.17)—the Lord wished to bring them before Abraham as a vivid reminder of how his descendants should not comport themselves. This outcry (*zahaqah*) is suggestive of sorrow or the cry for aid, not specifically one demanding retribution. “I cried with a loud and bitter cry” [Est 4.1]. Note that *zahaqah* is not from the cities themselves but against them though the Hebrew lacks a preposition. Since Abraham had been dwelling in Canaan



about ten years, he too must have joined in on this *zehaqah*, again having encountered the king of Sodom. As for the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, it is unspecified but must have been well known. Given the location of both cities close to the lowest place on earth, the *zehaqah* funneled up and spread throughout the surrounding area, reverberating against the mountains. It was not unlike the “smoke of the land that went up like the smoke of a furnace” [19.28] that was to occur shortly. The sin is “very grave,” the verb *kavad* (to be heavy) being used. And so the cry which funnels up and spreads around returns down to Sodom and Gomorrah, thereby compounding the sin. Hence, everyone had a tacit knowledge of what was going on down there at the lowest point of the earth’s surface, a fitting image of the underworld.

“I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry which has come to me; and if not, I will know” [vs. 21]. Anyplace in Canaan to Sodom and Gomorrah is down, that is, near the Dead or Salt Sea. So despite the *zehaqah* which had penetrated every corner of the territory, the Lord wants to find out for himself. It’s akin to 11.5 when the Lord decided to check out the city in the land of Shinar: “And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built.” That city fared much better than the impending fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. At least the inhabitants weren’t destroyed, just their language having been confused, something they could remedy.

Vs. 22 shifts back to the plural or “men” who headed down to Sodom while “Abraham still stood before the Lord.” By now it was past twilight and fully dark with only the stars to guide them. The distance wasn’t great, and the three men wanted to reach the outskirts of Sodom before dawn in order to reconnoiter the place before entering. At least most people would be sleeping, so they would make a discreet arrival. Besides, sinning is often associated with the cover of darkness, and the majority of people would be stone-drunk, not up until much later in the morning. While the three set off Abraham remained before the Lord even though the same Lord had left for Sodom. Abraham was preparing himself for to intercede for the cities which begins in the next verse and continues to the end of the chapter. He must have been privy to the sin of the two cities both from his visitors as well as persistent rumors. Though his nephew Lot had separated himself some time earlier (cf. Chapter Fourteen), surely they remained in touch. That’s why Abraham is persistent for divine mercy toward Sodom and Gomorrah: not just because of Lot and his family but for the people there about whose lives he had greater acquaintance.

“Then Abraham drew near” [vs. 23], the verb being *nagash* which also can refer to the bringing forth of an offering. “Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel” [Am 5.25]? In the case at hand, this *nagash* occurred as Abraham “stood before the Lord.” At first glance you’d think this *nagash* was sufficient but such is not the case. That means Abraham had to move—if not physically then spiritually—to get at another side of the Lord, if you will, one where he would beseech him for Sodom and Gomorrah. At ninety-nine years of age, he had nothing to lose, so why not? Abraham had the advantage of dealing with the Lord since his arrival in Canaan, including his diversion into Egypt. Thus he was familiar with how often the Lord puts people off in order to test them, almost to the point of taunting them. “Will you indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked?” Before Abraham posed this question he side-stepped the niceties of obeisance and came right out with showing his confidence and familiarity with the Lord. *Saphah* is the verb which suggests a scraping together as well as putting into a heap. “He shall descend into battle and perish” [1Sam 26.10]. By the way, the Bible has approximately forty-seven different verbs for “to destroy.” As intimated earlier, Abraham got this information about Sodom and Gomorrah through contacts with Lot; thus he did not succumb to the common temptation to blot out the cities, knowing that there had to be at least one righteous (*tsadyq*) person within them (tragically, that turned out different).

Abraham now commences his process of bargaining with the Lord over the *tsadyqim* or righteous ones commencing with fifty and ending with ten in vs. 32. Fifty seems a low enough number to start off with, twenty-five for Sodom and twenty-five for Gomorrah. While the text is concerned with the outcry against two cities (cf. vs. 20), throughout the bargaining process one city is mentioned and that isn't specified until vs. 26 as Sodom. Surely Abraham must have had in mind those *tsadyqim* who were subject to the tyrannical rule of their king as intimated in 14.17-24 when he came in contact with the man himself. Note the position of these supposed *tsadyqim*: first as "within the city" and followed by those "who are in it" [vs. 24]. The first position is *betok* and the second, *qerev*. The former refers to in the middle (not necessarily the geographic center) of something or of persons whereas the latter to in the midst as in the sense of at the heart of something or someone. Thus the fifty *tsadyqim* are in the middle and heart of Sodom (again, Gomorrah not mentioned). Should they be missing, the city has no reason to exist. As for their presence—and this applies to Abraham starting out with fifty *tsadyqim* and ending with ten—the number is less important than the two-fold position. All shouldn't be thought of as gathered together under one roof but scattered throughout the city unbeknownst to each other. In vs. 24 Sodom is described as a "place" or *maqom* which as noted earlier, is an inhabited area and can extend beyond the city proper to what we'd call today suburbs. As Abraham starts his bargaining process, this larger expanse of territory seems smaller than first glance, i.e., Sodom and satellite areas, and thus a larger population mass.

"Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked. Far be that from you! Shall not the judge of the earth do right" [vs. 25]? Abraham is putting words into the Lord's mouth, even to the point of a rebuke. *Chalylah* is the interrogative used here ('far be it from you') and *davar* is the noun for "thing," a word whose verbal root is to speak. Thus that which is done and exists out there had been spoken, and that implies a source...a speaker...if you will. In this sentence Abraham is reminding the Lord that he is judge of all the earth, presupposing that he will have mercy or better, "do right" or *misphpat* (judgment). To his surprise, the Lord responds immediately: "I will spare the whole city for their (the fifty) sake" [vs. 26]. These fifty are to be found *betok* or in the middle, not necessarily *qerev* or in the city's heart (cf. vs. 24). As in vs. 24, the Lord says that he would spare the city if fifty men were found *qerev* it, the verb there as here being *nasa'* which means "to raise" and was found in 13.6: "the land was not able to bear them."

And so Abraham discovers that the Lord will "raise" Sodom (again, no mention of Gomorrah) for fifty *tsadyqim*, righteous men. Instead of proceeding downward in number, Abraham must have wished he had started with a higher number...perhaps a hundred or even more. Nevertheless, he is stuck with this reduced number, so the only way he can proceed is by diminution, not increase. With regard to Sodom, the Lord says the "whole place" (*maqom* again) which includes surrounding areas. How to continue now? Abraham figures that a decrease by five *tsadyqim* is adequate; any more would be outright presumption. *Ya'al* is the verb for "take upon" which Abraham uses when speaking with the Lord. It applies to that which comes first and to be willing. "Because it has pleased the Lord" [1Sam 12.22]. Thus *ya'al* is a deferential word, allowing the person addressed to make up his or her mind. The respect implied is enhanced by Abraham calling himself "dust and ashes." That may be true, but he remains quite presumptuous of divine compassion. Such deference is a lead into asking the Lord if he'll spare the city if forty-five *tsadyqim* are "there," *betok* not being used. Abraham speaks not directly of sparing Sodom but of the Lord not destroying it, *shachath* being the verb first noted in 6.11: "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight." Use of *shachath* was a clever ploy on Abraham's part because it reminded the Lord of that incident just before the flood. If Abraham persuaded the Lord not to repeat this worldwide flood, generations after him would consider him their greatest hero. Neither the Lord nor Abraham wish to pursue this, so the Lord allows him to continue his bargaining, now at forty *tsadyqim* [vs. 29]. The pace of bargaining picks up now, Abraham being anxious at how things

turn out, at what number the Lord will relent. The downward process is interrupted by introduction of the words “I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord,” that is, another use of *ya'al* which reveals Abraham’s tongue-in-cheek deference. It’s that way because while sincere, he is desirous to get the bargaining over with and find out exactly how merciful is the Lord. The Lord, of course, knew this from the beginning yet plays along because of the exceptional situation of Sodom and Gomorrah.

As an introduction to Abraham’s final bargaining with the Lord—he stops at ten *tsadyqim*, figuring that number is more than enough—he bids him not to be angry. The amazing thing about the entire process beginning with vs. 23 is that we don’t pick up even the slightest trace of divine anger. Abraham instinctively knows that he has pushed it as far as he dares, so he relents. That’s why vs. 33 says “And the Lord went his way.” The Hebrew reads literally, “went the Lord as finished to speak to Abraham.” So the entire fate of Sodom and Gomorrah seems up in the air, unresolved. While Abraham started off with fifty *tsadyqim* and went to ten, all the while the “men set out from there” [vs. 16], that is, they set out to Sodom. This advance which begins with twilight and continues into the night hours is the backdrop to Abraham’s bargaining with the Lord. This last verse of Chapter Eighteen, a prelude to the fearful destruction of two cities, ends with “and Abraham returned to his place.” That place or *maqom* was not distance from where he had gone and is to be read in the context of vs. 23, “Then Abraham drew near.” Thus Abraham retreats, if you will, not to a physical *maqom* but to one characterized by his aloneness with Sarah by the tent under the oaks of Mamre. Does he communicate any of this to Sarah? Perhaps not for fear of being made a fool. Sarah had embarrassed herself earlier when she laughed at the prospect of giving birth at an advanced age, so why bother to make things worse? Oh that we could listen in on the conversation both had in their tent that night!

## Chapter Nineteen

“The two angels came to Sodom in the evening.” In the previous chapter we saw an alternation between the singular Lord and plural three men. Now it’s a matter of two angels (*mal'ak*), not men, this word fundamentally meaning a messenger and the second appearance of one, the first having assisted Hagar (cf. 16.7). So what happened to the third *mal'ak* en route to Sodom? Did he enter the city, stay away or return to the Lord? Because he was one of three entrusted with giving a report, he did return to the Lord in order to keep him abreast of the situation: not just about Abraham but how his other two compatriots were progressing in their mission. Surely the Lord was eager to get first hand information and rushed out to greet the angel as soon as he saw him. However, the Lord was put on the spot; he was faced with deciding the fate of the two cities for which Abraham had pleaded so eloquently.

Note the time of the arrival in Sodom by the two *mal'ak*, evening. That was the evening of the next day, not the day they had left Abraham and Sarah. The two messengers traveled all night and arrived in Sodom early in the morning. Surely they were anxious as to what their compatriot was reporting to the Lord as well as awaiting a response. Although they were familiar with their God’s patience, they had an uneasy feeling it was about to come to an end. Even there was a limit to what God could put up with. The two *mal'ak* reconnoitered the city from a safe distance, figuring that evening was the best time to enter, in other words, not so much under the cover of night but at twilight. Those in-between hours are ideal camouflage, better than darkness itself, because it’s difficult to distinguish faces and tell who’s who. Twilight’s other advantage over darkness is that people are more suspicious of movement and voice they cannot see, so better have it out in the relative open.

The opening verse now under consideration continues with a second sentence: “When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and bowed himself with his face to the earth.” This greeting follows the same as Abraham which opened Chapter Eighteen. Lot being at the gate during the cool evening hours is not

unlike the Lord himself who enjoyed taking walks that time in the garden of Eden (cf. 3.8). The city gate was also a place of coming and going, ideal for people-watching and more importantly, keeping an eye out for any strangers attempting to sneak in before the gates were closed for the night. Lot recognized the two men immediately despite the twilight. It wasn't that he had some special foreknowledge of their plan but recognized that they weren't natives and wanted to assist them. After all, Lot was an alien in Sodom which made him more sensitive to how strangers might be treated. They would stand out as targets for anyone wishing to take advantage of them. In fact, these men might have news of his long-lost uncle, Abraham, which certainly they did but not news Lot would like to hear.

“My lords, turn aside, I pray you, to your servant's house and spend the night” [vs. 2]. In other words, “Hasten inside the city gates before they're closed for the night. Get off the streets before the sin for which Sodom is noted manifests itself, night being the time for such behavior.” The verse at hand continues with Lot urging the two “lords” (*'adony*), the same term used by Abraham in 18.3. Although Lot achieved a degree of safety within Sodom, at best it was tenuous. Anytime or any night gangs of marauding people could stop by and assail him and his family. On the other hand, living in Sodom by day wasn't the problem; it was better than the arid wasteland just outside. Perhaps that harsh environment contributed to the reputation of the city inhabitants as the worst of all sinners. The words “rise up early” are used frequently in the Bible but here has special meaning: the sooner the two *mal'ak* get on the road, the better. During the visit by these two men Lot was eager for news of the outside world and possibly was on the verge of questioning them about his uncle, Abraham. He may have sensed vaguely yet in a real fashion that his uncle had beseeched the Lord for Sodom and Gomorrah and intuited that a disaster was not far off. With more precise information from his visitors, he and his family could get out before it struck.

Vs. 2 continues with a shocking response from the two *mal'ak*: “No, we will spend the night in the street.” *Rechov* is the word for “street” meaning a broad, open area and can apply to a city square. This is a sensible choice because other transients would be there...protection in numbers. However, Lot is shocked at this proposal, thinking his visitors either naive or unacquainted with Sodom's notorious reputation. That's why he “he urged them strongly” [vs. 3]. The verb is *patsar* and is found five other times in the Bible, two of which are here. It's intensified by addition of the preposition *b-* (in) which reads literally, “he urged in them.” One non-Genesis verse captures the sense of this verb which is used as a noun: “And stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry” [1Sam 15.23]. Their response to Lot's urging isn't recorded, but they consented. By expressing a desire to sleep out in the open, perhaps the visitors really didn't mean this; they wanted to test Lot to make sure he hadn't been corrupted since he resided in Sodom for so long a time.

So the two men acquiesced to Lot who offered them unleavened bread, that is, bread which had not time to rise, a foreshadowing of the haste with which the Israelites would leave Egypt: “So the people took their dough before it was leavened” [Ex 12.34]. Lot had an intimation that he'd have to take care of his visitors—unexpected on one hand yet expected on the other—so he wanted to show them the best hospitality as possible. All the while he must have had one ear cocked to any unusual sounds outside, awaiting people who felt he had betrayed them by welcoming strangers just prior to nightfall when the city gate would be slammed shut. Lot's fears were realized, worse than he could imagine. “But before they lay down, the men of the city...surrounded the house” [vs. 4]. Word of the two mens' arrival passed like wildfire throughout Sodom, so much that “the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man” came upon Lot's house. Additio of “young and old” suggest that the sin for which Sodom was so infamous permeated every person from the youngest to the oldest.



“Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may know them” [vs. 5]. Not just a few nor even a large crowd came out but the entire city, another sign that Sodom was rotten to the core. Their desire to “know” Lot’s two visitors reflects a desire for homosexual relations, *yadah* often being used within a sexual context. “Adam knew his wife” [4.1]. At last the nature of Sodom’s sin is out in the open, that sin which ascended from the deepest part of the earth to all surrounding areas. For Lot to go outside after having “shut the door behind him” was an incredible act of courage and proof to his visitors that he was prepared to defend them no matter what. If virtually all the inhabitants of Sodom were homosexual, they wouldn’t think twice at Lot inviting two men into his home day or night. What made Lot stand out was that he had two daughters: “Behold, I have two daughters who have not known man” [vs. 8]. Here is another example of *yadah* pertaining to sexual relationship. Lot was desperate saying this, knowing full well that the city’s inhabitants wouldn’t be interested. The same applies to his daughters inside the house; they grew up there and realized, in an odd way, that they were in a safe place, free from molestation, because they were women. So Lot’s offering shouldn’t come as a surprise neither to us nor to his daughters. Actually, Lot was aggravating the situation. His fellow citizens knew he was a stranger among them, and to offer them two women was a first-class insult. As for the two visitors, Lot pleads for them because they “have come under the shelter of my roof” [vs. 9]. *Tsel* fundamentally means “shadow” here implying that the house is a shadow—a counterpart—of the one who lives there. “Hide me under the shadow of your wings” [Ps 17.8].

The situation gets worse by the minute with Lot having the door shut firmly behind him and the entire city surrounding his house. It must have been a horrible experience for those inside—Lot’s wife, daughters and the two visitors—with dozens of faces pressing in through the windows and from every nook and cranny. All were waiting a signal to break through which easily they could do at a moment’s notice. When the men said “this fellow came to sojourn” clearly it was a reference to Lot’s alien status at Sodom. Still, it’s amazing that Lot, a married man with a family, could have survived so long in such a homosexually oriented city. For so many years, especially since the birth of his two daughters, his neighbors resented him and wanted to take out their wrath at a convenient opportunity. Now it came. “Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and drew near to break the door” [vs. 9]. Here is the other occasion for the verb *patsar* noted in vs. 3 (‘He urged them strongly’) which really shows how intent Lot had been to have the two men reside with him. The men of Sodom—every age was there—simply did not *patsar* Lot at the door but from all around because they had “surrounded the house” [vs. 4]. So Lot was at the center of a circle feeling pressure from every point, ready to succumb at any minute. However, at least for now the inhabitants of Sodom weren’t so much interested in Lot nor his two daughters but the two men inside the house, the reason for their *patsar* against Lot and their intent “to break the door” [vs. 9]. They would deal with Lot and the female members of his family later which must have struck genuine terror in them.

“But the men put forth their hands and brought Lot into the house and shut the door” [vs. 10]. A vivid picture, touched with a certain humor, as four pairs of hands reached out and grabbed Lot so suddenly that he as well as the men trying to assail him didn’t know what had happened. That left a space in front of the door which was filled right away with those men gathered about the house. Now the problem was how to deal with the entire town of Sodom pressing in around Lot’s house which at this point was ready to implode. The two visitors “struck with blindness the men who were at the door...so that they wearied themselves groping for the door” [vs. 11]. Note that only those at the door were struck blind, not necessarily the others. However, that was sufficient deterrence to scare off everyone else. This incident demonstrates that despite Sodom’s reputation for sinfulness, terrorizing just a handful revealed their inherent weakness. Surely if the inhabitants wanted to assail Lot’s house and those inside, they could have even if they were blind.

“Have you anyone else here” [vs. 12]? Earlier the men sat down to eat (cf. vs. 3), so everyone in Lot’s household must have been involved. Perhaps they were inquiring as to any children whom they didn’t see. Then they refined the question as to apply to sons, daughters, sons-in-law or anyone in the city. That’s quite a large group of people to assemble in one night, given the fact that entire town attempted to knock down Lot’s door. So before the two men were to blast Sodom out of existence, Lot, his wife and two daughters were forced out in the middle of the night to waken their relatives and assemble them in one spot. Surely those who were blinded continued groping about in their blindness; to protect Lot’s family from those not blinded, the two visitors extended this affliction before sunrise when destruction was slated to arrive. As for those struck blind, they were the lucky ones. They didn’t see what was about to come from the heavens and how it affected those around them.

“For we are about to destroy this place because the outcry against its people has become great before the Lord, and the Lord has sent us to destroy it” [vs. 13]. *Shachat* is the verb for “to destroy” and was used in reference to Abraham’s bargaining with the Lord. The two visitors must have had in mind that extraordinary incident as they stood beside the Lord watching Abraham’s intercession come into their presence. Still, that was not enough, and the time for action had come. The men remind Abraham of that “outcry” or *zehaqah* first noted 18.21 which must be dealt with immediately. “The Lord has sent us to destroy it” reveals the nature of the two men as *mal’ak* or messengers...but in this instance more than bearing a message. If the messengers were to convey their mission to Lot without the inhabitants of Sodom assaulting his house, he might not have believed them. Now that he had proof of their power, Lot “went out and said to his sons-in-law who were to marry his daughters, ‘Up, get out of this place’” [vs. 14]. Two married men living in Sodom was an anomaly, including Lot and his wife. That made a small, tightly-knit clan which stood in sharp contrast to the majority of inhabitants. It was a miracle they survived so long but then again, they were aliens tolerated for any economic benefits they might offer. Apparently the two sons-in-law didn’t get wind of what their fellow citizens were trying to do by surrounding Lot’s house, thinking it was just another incident of partying out in the streets. However, they thought Lot was jesting. As to their fate, presumably they too were consumed as they lingered in the city. Lot figured that it wasn’t worth arguing further, so he returned home to get ready for a hasty departure.

“When morning dawned, the angels urged Lot” [vs. 15]. Here the men—whether two or three, the third having returned from the Lord isn’t clear—are identified once again as *mal’ak*, angels. Their true identity which had been concealed is now out in the open in order that Lot and his household take them seriously. The verb for “urged” is *’auts* which suggests making haste. “The taskmasters were urgent, saying ‘Complete your work, your daily task’” [Ex 5.13]. It is similar to *patsar* as far as urging goes though the latter verb conveys the sense of a weight pressing down. Like *patsar* in vs. 3, *’auts* in the verse at hand is prefaced by the preposition *b-* (‘in’) which intensifies the sense of urgency: “the angels urged-in Lot.” The purpose of this insistence? To leave Sodom “lest you be consumed in the punishment of the city” [vs. 15]. Even though Lot grasped the situation, his family didn’t, for they thought he was using a now familiar ploy to protect them against the inhabitants of Sodom. It was a survival mechanism, one that worked in the past, but this time the presence of the two mysterious visitors pushed Lot’s case too far.

“But he lingered; so the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters” [vs. 16]. *Mahah* is the verb for “lingered” and suggests a refusal to assess the situation at hand. “I made haste and did not delay” [Ps 119.60]. Understandably Lot was dazed at what had just occurred: two unannounced visitors, his family in peril, men of the city struck blind and now an impending disaster which will wipe out Sodom. As for the verb “seized,” twice the Hebrew text adds “by the hand:” one for the wife and

one for the daughters, a way to convey the absolute urgency of the situation. While Lot lingered, his family didn't; they saw the opportunity to make an escape and were intent on not passing it up. Vs. 16 continues with "the Lord being merciful to him, and they brought him forth and set him outside the city." Such is the reason for the two angels coming to Lot and his family, compassion or *chemlah*, a noun (the only one in the Bible) derived from *chamal* which applies to showing gentleness. "For you had compassion (verb) on me" [1Sam 23.21]. Since the two angels were privy to the type of destruction soon to be inflicted upon Sodom, they knew exactly how far from to remove Lot and his family. As for the two sons-in-law who thought Lot was jesting (cf. vs. 14), they stood outside their houses laughing at what was going on, thinking Lot had gone crazy. Even they refused to believe this was the real thing with those men at their door whom had been struck blind just a few hours earlier.

"And when they had brought them forth, they said, 'Flee for your life; do not look back or stop anywhere in the valley, lest you be consumed'" [vs. 17]. The second "they" in Hebrew is the first person singular. "Life" here is *nephesh* or soul which also translates as "breath," the animating principle of a human being. Once at a distance the two angels deemed safe—they also wanted to protect them from pursuit by the men of Sodom—they cut them loose with sufficient time to get out of the valley even further. The main goal was to get as high as possible because the wrath from heaven will bounce off the valley walls. Thus the reason for not looking back upon Sodom is not to avoid being blinded by what they thought would be a flash of light from heaven. As will be noted shortly, destruction did not come at once like an atomic bomb being dropped but in two methodically laid out stages. The curiosity of Lot's wife got the best of her, a fatal mistake. For the cities, divine wrath at this point knew no bounds. Again, it wasn't a furious blast but a slow, methodically planned out plan of destruction. Lot persisted in his lingering noted in vs. 16 by saying that he has found favor (*chen*) in the sight of his two visitors who turned out to be angels or messengers from God as well as great kindness or *chesed*. The latter term is considered widely to be untranslatable, combining zeal, greed, ardent love and desire. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" [Ps 23.6]. As for the verse at hand, Lot says that the two angels have literally "great-ed" (*gadal*) their *chesed* toward him. Lot claims he cannot "flee to the hills" [vs. 19] not so much because of age...his wife and two daughters did it...but due to a certain sluggishness, a reluctant to leave a city where he made his home, albeit under difficult circumstances. Lot may even have felt a tinge of sympathy with his fellow citizens despite the fact that he was a stranger among them and recently they attempted to assault his family. Note the words "lest the disaster overtake me," the noun being *raha* (evil) and the verb, *davaq* (to cling). "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife" [1.24].

More in frustration than in anger and because he was thinking of his family, the two angels relented and spoke with Lot whose words reveal a bit of whining: "Behold, yonder city is near enough to flee to, and it is a little one" [vs. 20]. Lot continues in the same verse, "Let me flee there." In other words, he asks permission while his wife and two daughters move on out of the valley. It seems they weren't as much concerned for him, having hastened as quickly as their legs carried them. As for the sons-in-law, who cares? Actually the term "city" is a misnomer of sorts, *hyr* being applicable to anything from a cosmopolitan area to a village. The basic idea of *hyr* seems to be a place that is fortified. Finally the angel—back to the singular, the other angel having left to prepare for the impending destruction and partly out of frustration with Lot—said that he "will not overthrow the city of which you have spoken" [vs. 21]. Here the angel claims to be the agent responsible whereas vs. 24 it is the Lord. It is not a confusion but a demonstration of the close identification between the Lord and his *mal'ak*, his messengers who do his will whether on earth or in heaven. The angel calls this gesture to save Lot from fleeing a "favor" or *davar* which fundamentally means "word." Furthermore, this *davar* is the same *davar* "of which you (Lot) have spoken." As for the "favor" the singular angel consents to do, it is a momentary stay of execution, of not overthrowing the city, *haphak* being the verb which can

intimate a change for the worse. “You turn things upside down” [Is 29.16]! Presumably that *hyr* or city was in the valley, on the same plain as Sodom, yet sufficiently distant to escape divine wrath. The angel said that he “can do nothing until you arrive there” [vs. 22] meaning that this the last angel with Lot continued to be with him. Later Abraham recounted to him his bargaining with the Lord, of starting with fifty righteous men within Sodom and daring to go as low as ten. One, of course, is the lowest possible, a demonstration of divine forbearance. By reason of his experience of having lived in Sodom, Lot must have thought Abraham to be either a fool or naive! Lot was fully aware that not even one just man was there...except himself.

The small city or *hyr* to which Lot begged to flee was Zoar and named after Lot’s own words, “Is it not a little one” [vs. 20]? He got there shortly before daybreak, for vs. 23 says ominously, “The sun had risen on the earth when Lot came to Zoar.” No one took notice of Lot’s arrival; if they did, they were well acquainted with him, but those up on the city ramparts, the night watchmen, knew something was terribly wrong by the way he rushed toward them. They did manage to catch a glimpse of the angel speaking with Lot, but given the semi-light of the predawn hours, it was difficult to make that person out. Perhaps they were suspicious that two men had been approaching and suddenly just one appeared on the horizon. Horizon is taken literally because the plain in which Zoar, Sodom and Gomorrah were built was flat as a pancake. The guards must have questioned Lot at some length before allowing him inside. Was the other man—the *mal’ak* who now ascended into heaven—a spy? Was he Abraham checking out the lay of the land before attempting an invasion? Once this was cleared up and Lot had recounted his story about the impending doom of Sodom and Gomorrah, the guards were at ease. Lot must have had too much to drink the previous night, having made up this wild story of fire and brimstone about to rain down upon the two neighboring cities.

“Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven” [vs. 24]. That is to say, at the brink of dawn when Lot was safely ensconced within the city walls of Zoar. This happened when Lot entered the gate and was conversing with the night watchmen. Right in the middle of their conversation the heavens started to roar and turn blacker than the darkest night. The reason? *Gaphryth* is the word for “brimstone” or pitch, a thick, black goo or pitch-like substance similar to that protective coating of *gaphryth* Noah applied to the ark (cf. 6.14). The second part of the destruction was fire. “On the wicked he will rain coals of fire and brimstone; a scorching will shall be the portion of their cup” [Ps 11.6]. It was logical to first rain down *gaphryth*, horrible stuff which literally ensnared every living thing in Sodom and Gomorrah. There was a pause of some time while people anguished in tar which weighed them down to the ground. Then came the fire...not in great balls but in small bursts, just enough to inflame the goo and boil everyone as if they were in a bath of molten tar. The whole process was a slow, painful death. Once finished, it hardened solid as a rock, not unlike a smooth pavement with everybody and everything trapped beneath. As for the actual process, vs. 24 mentions the Lord twice first as having rained *gaphryth* down upon the two cities followed by fire. The first is active (‘rained’) whereas the second is passive (‘from the Lord’). After having sent so much heavy, black goo it was easy for fire to come, actually like striking a match and tossing it out the window of a car.

Vs. 25 says that not only did the Lord overthrow (*haphak* as in vs. 21) Sodom and Gomorrah but the valley, inhabitants and “what grew on the ground.” *Kikar* is the word for “valley” noted in 13.11 as that of the Jordan which had captured the attention of Lot when he separated from Abraham. This word also translates as “plain” and “talent” which was indicated in that context by reason of their roundness. As for any growth associated with the two cities, it was cultivated, not natural, by reason of the barrenness of that area. Surely this incredible noise from heaven woke the inhabitants of Zoar who rushed to the city walls and saw their neighboring larger towns wiped out in two stages. The smoke



arising from the *gaphryth* that had been set on fire cast aglow that was blood red because of the rising sun followed quickly by a burning tar stench that filled the valley. While all this was transpiring Lot must have been frantic about his wife and two daughters. Had they managed to escape to the safety of the hills or were they consumed?

“But Lot’s wife behind him looked back, and she became a pillar of salt” [vs. 26]. This hearkens back to the angels’ injunction of vs. 17 which also included one not to “stop anywhere in the valley.” There as here the verb “look back” is *navat* which means having regard for the object which one is gazing upon. “Look toward heaven and number the stars if you are able to number them.” Note that Lot had taken refuge in Zoar whereas here his wife is behind him. Though Lot felt safe behind walls, at least temporarily, he wanted to rejoin his wife and two daughters. And so he left Zoar and headed in the direction all four originally took after they parted with the two angels. He rushed ahead of his wife (whose name isn’t given) to lead the way. Somewhere in that *kikar* or valley (cf. vs. 17) or halfway up its bowl shape Lot’s wife decided to stop and look behind here. It was natural to be riveted by the anguished calls of those stuck in the goo-like substance of *gaphryth*. Then again, her attention may have been caught by the silence right after this *gaphryth* had fallen and before the fire reigned down. Whatever the case, suddenly she turned into a pillar of salt. We don’t have reaction from Lot nor from his two daughters who, despite their intense desire to look back, did not but kept their attention focused ahead until they reached the valley’s rim. Did this same injunction not to look back apply to the inhabitants of Zoar? After all, the angels didn’t tell them to flee. As for the fate of that town, it survived as noted in later verses.

Vs. 27 shifts attention from Lot to Abraham who got wind of the tragedy: “And Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the Lord.” It’s easy to locate where this had happened, 18.22, the place from which Abraham saw off his mysterious visitors by the oaks of Mamre. Thus this spot was not far from the ridge overlooking the valley in which Sodom and Gomorrah were situated. Of course, Abraham knew what had happened upon being jolted out of bed by the noise and smoke that came up from the valley. He charged his wife Sarah to stay within the tent...not that its flimsy construction would offer protection but out of fear that she too might become a pillar of salt like Lot’s wife. As Abraham ran to the rim of the valley thoughts of that very place where he had been standing “before the Lord” rushed through his mind or when he pleaded for the salvation of Sodom. Sodom’s destruction was pretty much a foregone conclusion, yet still it weighed upon his heart. Naturally enough, Abraham’s attention turned toward Lot and his family. Did they manage to escape, Lot being the only righteous man in Sodom? It’s easy to picture Abraham standing on that valley ridge as “he looked down toward Sodom” [vs. 28], the verb being *shaqaph* as noted in 18.16: “Then the men set out from there, and the looked toward Sodom.” Then again, Abraham may not have rushed up to the ridge in his eagerness to see what had transpired. He walked up to it slowly and with hesitation, dreading to see what he knew what was the mission of his three mysterious visitors. There was no danger of Abraham being turned into a pillar of salt. If he had “stood before the Lord” [18.23], that means he saw the Lord and had no fear of suffering the fate of Lot’s wife.

As for the valley in which Sodom and Gomorrah were located, “the smoke of the land went up like the smoke of a furnace” [vs. 28]. Only two other references to “smoke” (*qytor*) are found in the Bible, Pss 119.83 and 148.8, the former being noted here: “For I have become like a wineskin in the smoke, yet I have not forsaken your statutes.” This image suggests the wine, having been dried out, causes the skin to shrivel and become wrinkled, good for nothing. *Qytor* is derived from *qatar*, to burn incense, which intimates, as does the Ps 119.83 verse, that a thick cake-like substance had accumulated as in a container that holds incense. That’s the stuff Abraham saw ascending from the valley floor: an ugly, black smoke with an equally ugly, black-like scent that seared his nostrils...i.e., *qytor* being the opposite

of its counterpart derived from *qatar* (incense or *qitoreth*, more specifically, sweet incense). That's why this smoke is associated with a furnace, *kivshan*. It is found three other times in the Bible, one of which is not entirely unlike the view Abraham had seen: "And Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain quaked greatly" [Ex 19.18]. Here *kivshan* as kiln is similar to that tough coating of baked material that has formed which gives off a burned odor described by the word *qytor*, smoke. Surely Moses had in mind the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah when he recorded his encounter with the Lord on Mount Sinai. No wonder his experience was so terrifying to the Israelites who looked on from the camp below. Like Abraham, Moses had "stood before the Lord" [18.22] and interceded for the Israelites. He too must have been fearful that when he came down from the mountain, only one Israelite would be left and the rest overturned as the two cities. Such a tragedy would be the ultimate triumph for Pharaoh who had persecuted the Israelites.

"God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow" [vs. 29]. This part of the verse is prefaced by the words "when God destroyed the cities," the verb *shachat* being used as in vs. 13 by the visitors. While Lot had been the center of attention with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, mention of Abraham returns to the central character, the one whom God had remembered, *zakar*. As noted in other places, the noun "male" is derived from this verb implying that God had remembered Abraham with the intent of providing a long desired heir to inherit the land of Canaan. Except for the incident with his two daughters below, Lot more or less disappears from the scene. In this way he does not become a rival to Abraham. Actually, there's no record of he and Abraham meeting even in passing. That must have been a relief to Abraham as well as Sarah in their advanced old age.

Vs. 30 is revealing of Lot's experience of having just escaped by the skin of his teeth, for he "dwelt in the hills with his two daughters" followed with mention that he and they dwelt in a cave. No small wonder that they took refuge there away from the inhabitants of Zoar as well as Abraham. While the Zoarites weren't as sinful as the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, to some degree they must have come under their sordid influence. Surely Lot didn't want to repeat his experience with the two visitors and the rape of his daughters that almost came to pass. This cave was high up on the edge of the valley overlooking the remains of the destroyed cities, a constant reminder. They decided to remain there, afraid to go down to Zoar or to Abraham. Being in such dire straits with no prospect of a male heir, a situation not unlike the earlier experience of Abraham, one daughter said to the other "there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of all the earth" [vs. 31]. Such is her way of saying that there is no man around for the two women to have sexual intercourse. Yes, there were men in both Zoar and Abraham's retinue, but that wouldn't work. The only man around was their father, Lot, so they decided to make him drunk: "we will lie with him, that we may preserve offspring" [vs. 32]. *Zereh* is the word for "offspring," alternately as sowing. This regrettable situation is understandable not so much in the circumstances but due to the fact that the daughters had been raised in Sodom. They knew it was wrong to have intercourse with their father, but then again, this was part and parcel of what transpired all around them throughout their lives.

It was easy to get Lot drunk after all he had been through. This happened not once but twice, each daughter taking their turn on two consecutive nights. Lot was so overcome with wine as well as what he went through that barely he knew what was going on. During both instances of intercourse he must have thought he was sleeping with his wife who earlier had turned into a pillar of salt. As a result of this desperate measure, "both the daughters of Lot were with child by their father" [vs. 36]. Such sexual relations must have produced two deformed children though it goes unmentioned. From that time until the daughters gave birth nine long months passed with all held up in that cave. The two sons

were named Moab and Ben-ammi, the latter being father of the Amorites, two future neighbors of Israel who often engaged in warfare. And so the two sons were deformed from the point of view of Israel, that is, they posed a continual threat to her existence. Abraham must have been horrified at this but didn't do anything. He left them to their own devices in the cave, figuring that with the passage of time they would leave and not be a threat. Years later Abraham must have regretted not having slain Lot and his two pregnant daughters. He feared their experience in Sodom would have perpetuated that city's notorious sin among his clan but couldn't bring himself to it due to his loyalty to Lot.

## Chapter Twenty

This chapter parallels that of Chapter Twelve, the then-named Abram's journey into Egypt when he was much younger.

The words opening vs. 1 are simple yet telling: "From there." That is to say, Abraham had just witnessed the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah by the three mysterious visitors and wished to get away from "there" as quickly as possible. Nothing is said of the possibility of him meeting Lot and his two daughters; silence is an indication that they decided to remain held up in that cave at the rim of the valley overlooking the plain. Also it's a tacit acknowledgment that Abraham must vacate that area as soon as possible and leave them behind. Perhaps Abraham was motivated to maintain that distance between him and his nephew Lot which originated over their increasing wealth of flocks and herds (cf. 13.5-6). While destitute at the moment, Lot could regain his wealth and pose a threat. And so, Abraham and his retinue "journeyed toward the territory of the Negeb and dwelt between Kadesh and Shur; and he sojourned in Gerar." The traveling distance isn't great but offered sufficient distance to put the recent experience behind him. While on the move Abraham thought of the three visitors, of possibly encountering them once again, but was glad he didn't, for that would mean something ominous lay in store. Everyone whom he encountered got wind of Sodom and Gomorrah, so when they discovered that Abraham actually had seen the immediate aftermath, they pressed him for details. Surely many mourned the loss of both cities which were vital for commerce, etc. Abraham was no stranger to the Negeb, for he journeyed there earlier shortly after his departure from his native Haran (cf. 12.9). There are two stages to this journey with two types of abiding: first is a dwelling or *yashav* which is of a more permanent type followed by sojourning or *gur* which intimates not belonging to the place in which one is living: "So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there." And so the *yashav* suggests settling down in the sense of being at ease with one's surroundings and *gur*, a certain uneasiness and readiness to move on as soon as the right opportunity presented itself. During both Abraham and Sarah must have discussed the promise made by the three visitors. By now Sarah was in her early months of pregnancy and knew what the three visitors said indeed would come to pass.

As noted, Chapter Twenty begins with Abraham moving away from the oaks of Mamre (cf. 18.1) immediately after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham's advanced age must be kept in mind: he undertook this move at almost one hundred years old. Abraham retained his possessions into advanced old age whereas Lot, much younger, lost everything. Abraham was too old to take on Lot and his two daughters, especially with the impending birth of his long-promised son. Anyone who might interfere with that most important event would pose a direct threat to his mission.

"And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, 'She is my sister'" [vs. 2], words reminiscent of 12.13, only at that time Abram and Sarai (their former names) were considerably younger. Did Abraham fear the same might happen to his wife being so old? Apparently Sarah's beauty was so stunning that she retained it even now, for "Abimelech, king of Gerar, sent and took Sarah." He got word of Abraham's sojourning—his *gur*—in his kingdom after having dwelt between Kadesh and Shur. That must have been

relatively short because no account is given. Word got around quickly as to this stranger in their mist, one who beheld the ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah, and therefore of some local notoriety. Even more than this, Abraham was famous for having entertained the three mysterious visitors. Perhaps Abimelech was afraid the same fate might overtake his kingdom; by taking Abraham's wife, he could use her as surety should the three mysterious visitors return.

“But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night” [vs. 3]. This is the first instance of a dream (*chalom*) in the Bible, a means God will employ to communicate with people, and the person at hand is a potential enemy compared with the direct face-to-face encounters enjoyed by Abraham and his predecessors. The dictionary meaning of verbal root, *chalam* has an interesting derivation; it means to be fat, and being fat tends to make one inclined to sleep and therefore dreams. This new type of coming wasn't a visual presence—Abimelech says nothing about seeing the Lord—but one by which God made himself known by hearing. It is to Abimelech's credit that he attributed this dream to God, the same God of Abraham. The words God said to him (‘you are a dead man’) are startling enough to awaken anyone from the deepest sleep. Apparently Abimelech didn't know Sarah was a “man's wife,” just that she was extraordinarily beautiful even in advanced age (Abimelech himself might have been around the same age, hence Sarah's appeal). “Now Abimelech had not approached her,” the verb being *qarav* which is applicable to sexual relations. That's to his credit and reveals an innate moral uprightness revealed further by his words, “Lord, will you slay an innocent people” [vs. 4]? The adjective for “innocent” is *tsedeq* or righteous and is applied to the plural “people” or *goy* which later in history applied to non-Israelites. The verbal root of *goy* is *gur* (to sojourn) from which the proper name Gerar is derived, the kingdom of Abimelech in which Abraham finds himself as a temporary resident. Abimelech's use of *goy* suggests the close identity between king and his subjects as well as his concern for the Lord not to slay them as he feared might be the case with the recent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The uprightness of Abimelech is revealed further in vs. 5: “In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this.” Such are his words within this, the first recorded dream, meaning that in his sleep Abimelech was carrying on an active conversation with the Lord. Because we have here a unique form of communication, the Lord was trying it out in order to see how well went it went. Judging by Abimelech's response, the Lord was pleased and decided to use it on a regular basis. For him it was much easier than face-to-face dialogue where he had to assume some guise as not to overwhelm the person with whom he was communicating. At the same time the person knows fully that God is God and not subject to manipulation. As vs. 5 just quoted, Abimelech claims to have integrity of heart and innocence of hands, a straight-forward statement lacking guile which impressed the Lord considerably. *Tom* is the noun for “integrity” and connotes fulness as well as prosperity. “May integrity and uprightness preserve me” [Ps 25.21]. As for innocence pertaining to hands which intimates not having committed murder, the noun is *niqayon* from the verbal root *naqah*, to be clean. “I wash my hands in innocence and go about your altar, O Lord” [Ps 26.6].

The lacks of guile is so obvious that the Lord acknowledges it by saying that he knows (*yadah* in vs. 6 with its connotation of intimate...sexual...knowledge) Abimelech's integrity. However, the Lord makes it clear that such integrity (and innocence though it's not mentioned here) comes from him; after all, this is the first contact with a human being in a dream, and the Lord wants to get priorities established clearly. If this weren't the case, Abimelech would be misguided about his dream when discussing it with others. People would figure that if the king communed with God in a dream, they could as well. The Lord puts both Abimelech's *tom* and *niqayon* in terms of not sinning, that he alone prevented him from *chata* which fundamentally means to miss the mark as in the case of archery. The Hebrew for “against me” uses the preposition *l-* prefaced to “me” and is more direct, “to me.” The Lord continues



with telling Abimelech to restore Sarah to Abraham, that is, return or *shuv*. “The Lord restores the fortunes of his people” [Ps 14.7].

The Lord bids Abimelech to restore Sarah to Abraham because he is a prophet [vs. 7] or *navy*, the first use of this term in the Bible. So just like a dream, a second novelty is introduced; what makes them stand out is they are revealed to someone not belonging to Abraham’s retinue. Although Abimelech was familiar with various sages in his kingdom as well as other locals, this did not come as a total surprise because Abraham was a foreigner and therefore most likely was considered as being endowed with special powers. The Lord puts Abimelech at ease immediately by saying that Abraham as *navy* ‘will pray for you, and you shall live.’ As with the other two terms *chalom* (dream) and prophet (*navy*) introduced for the first time, we have yet another one, pray or *palal* which connotes a sense of judging, of interceding, and fits in well with the idea of a prophet. “Then Phinehas stood up and interposed, and the plague was ended” [Ps 106.30]. The Lord ends the dream and thus the conversation with King Abimelech with a warning, that should he fail to obey, he “and all that are yours” will die. Here’s another use of the preposition *l-* prefaced to “yours” reading literally “to you,” a promise of direct retribution.

Again, giving Abimelech credit, he rises early the next day, summons his servants, and tells them all what had transpired: “and the men were very much afraid” [vs. 8]. Who wouldn’t? This was the very first time anyone (apart from the king) heard words about divine communication through a dream, what a prophet was and what it meant for this prophet to *palal* or intercede for someone. Right afterwards we get the impression that Abimelech summoned Abraham at the crack of day: “Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, ‘What have you done to us?’” Note the first person plural, the identity of king and people. While he acknowledges his sin, he complains to Abraham that he has “brought on me and my kingdom a great sin.” Abraham must have been dumbfounded, for it was the king who “sent and took Sarah” [vs. 2]—not directly but through servants—whose job was to keep a close eye out for the king; in other words, they were his spies. Abimelech he complained further to Abraham, “You have done to me things that ought not to be done.” Being a king, Abraham didn’t express his outrage but kept it inside him. However, he makes an interesting response in vs. 11, “There is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.” How could there be? After all, Abraham was in a kingdom that goes by the name of Gerar which, as noted above, derives from the verbal root *gur*, to sojourn and thus to be apart...in this instance apart from the living God. The two are virtually synonymous. Abimelech must have been shaken deeply by these words because they echo the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Was Abraham intimating that Gerar was the same as those recently overthrown cities? Fortunately the encounter had a happy ending, for Abraham was impressed with the upright character of Abimelech who learned to fear the Lord after his dream.

After a satisfactory explanation of why Abraham calls his wife sister (‘daughter of my mother,’ vs. 12), Abimelech continued to show his graciousness by bestowing upon him “sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves” [vs. 14]. This was a shrewd move on his part because Abimelech knew that if he appeased Abraham, the one famous for having conversed with the three mysterious visitors prior to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, he would appease the Lord as well. As a kind of insurance in this regard Abimelech goes further: “Behold my land is before you; dwell where it pleases you” [vs. 15]. That is to say, Abimelech offers Gerar—the land of sojourning (*gur*)—as a permanent dwelling place for Abraham who came there after Sodom and Gomorrah had been whipped out. Gerar was within the larger territory belonging to the Canaanites, so he felt that this place was as good as any. Now he had not just protection but protection from a king in the territory he had been sojourning, something that had plagued Abraham since his departure from Haran decades earlier.

In vs. 16 Abimelech turns attention to Sarah by calling Abraham her brother, thereby acknowledging the rather complicated relationship outlined in vss. 12-13. The silver he gave her was a “vindication in the eyes of all who are with you” [vs. 16], *kesuth* being the noun which alternately means a covering. “I make sackcloth their covering” [Is 503]. With this sense in mind, Abimelech wishes to cover the error he made by taking Sarah—and don’t forget that she was a hundred years old!—against the will of Abraham. Vs. 16 concludes with the king saying “and before every one you are righted,” that is to say, Abraham is *yakach* or shown justice. This verb also means mean to argue or convict, a sense that applies to the verse at hand which works to Abraham’s credit. “There the righteous might dispute with him” [Job 23.7].

As a gesture of goodwill, Abraham “prayed (*palal*, as in vs. 7) to God; and God healed Abimelech” [vs. 17]. The verb for heal is *rapha*’ which connotes a letting down or relaxing. “He sent his word and healed them” [Ps 107.20]. Not only was Abimelech healed but his wife and female slaves which intimates that the affliction consisted in the women not being able to bear children. This was one result of Abraham’s observation earlier in vs. 11, “there is no fear of God in this place.” Such barrenness was in response to the one hundred year old wife of Abraham, Sarah. She must have been impressed greatly, taking this as yet another confirmation that her pregnancy soon will come to term. Chapter Twenty concludes with a statement as to this fact “because of Sarah.” The Hebrew “because of” reads literally as “on the word” [*davar*]...on the testimony of Sarah as witness for what will come in the very near future.

## Chapter Twenty-One

“The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised.” This statement recaps, if you will, the words of 18.10: “I will surely return to you in the spring, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.” Note the singular “Lord” just after the previous verse with the plural “they” asking for the whereabouts of Sarah. So Sarah, not to mention Abraham, was uncertain as to the identity of the divine presence especially at her advanced age. The spring was nine months from the time the (singular) visitor had spoken with Sarah. Between then and that future time a lot was about to happen: destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the escape of Lot and his two daughters as well as their languishing in the cave, the journey to Gerar and the abduction of Sarah at the hands of King Abimelech. Even for two much younger people that would have been almost beyond human endurance. Perhaps by now Sarah was thinking to herself and without letting Abraham in on it, was all this wandering about into so many dead ends worth it, now with the prospect of giving birth at the age of a hundred? The verb “visited” is *paqad* which can apply to the mustering of troops or putting a person in charge. In brief, *paqad* suggests the impartation of responsibility. “If you tried my heart, if you visited me by night” [Ps 17.3]. As for the second word of vs. 1 (‘promised’), it’s the common verb *davar*, to speak, which has broader connotations than the uttering of words.

“And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age” [vs. 2]. At first reading this conception appears to have happened just now but refers back to 18.10 noted in the last paragraph. The verse at hand continues with “at the time of which God had spoken to him.” The word for “time” is *mohed* (not unlike the New Testament notion of *kairos*, particular or special event) which is another reference to that singular visitor has spoken with Sarah in 18.14: “at the appointed time I will return to you, in the spring.” The first encounter of Sarah by one of the three mysterious visitors suggests that he will return nine months later (as we are now at the beginning of Chapter Twenty-One), but the details of such an encounter are lacking. That doesn’t seem to disappoint neither Abraham nor Sarah because as with the earlier encounter, two cities had been destroyed and the same fate might be in store for other places should one of these now familiar visitors turn up as at the oaks of Mamre. Still, Sarah was sensitive to

the communication she had then and kept it in mind for future reference ('in the spring') so when it came, she would be prepared. We can compare her rumination with that of the Virgin Mary at the birth of her son, "But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" [Lk 2.19].

A brief note as to the words of vs. 3: "the name of his son who was born to him whom Sarah bore him." First the child is born to the husband (Abraham) which is true physically in that he received the babe as it came out of his mother's womb. At the same time vs. 3 has the mother who bore the child. In both instances the verb *yalad* is used, to give birth. Yet prior to the birth, people in Abraham's retinue must have marveled at the pregnancy of his wife at the age of a hundred, something unheard of. Some may have mocked Sarah behind her back, considering it a false pregnancy after she had gone childless for so long. As for the name Isaac bestowed upon the newly born infant, it harkens back to the query by the three mysterious visitors in 18.9 and in vs. 12 where Sarah laughed, *tsachaq*. Chances are that until that time the proper name Isaac hadn't existed, and this was an opportunity (*mohed*) for it to be given in order to commemorate such an unusual birth. True to his faithful nature, Abraham fulfilled the covenant of circumcision made with the Lord in 17.10. Then it applied to those born in Abraham's household but now...at last...to his own son. The interval between birth and circumcision was eight days (cf. 17.12), a waiting period combining the first day after the six days of creation which, in turn, was followed by the day of divine rest. Those who were first to have been circumcised didn't have to wait that period of time because they weren't born to Abraham. Therefore this, the first eight day wait, must have been one full of joy as well as tension as everyone considered the creation and divine rest and the newness that followed, the eighth day. Was that mysterious visitor present at the birth and circumcision? No. His two-fold role had been as noted in vs. 1 *paqad* (to visit) and *davar* (to promise), after which quickly he disappeared as typical with all angelic beings. What about King Abimelech? He wasn't present either, although he heard of the miraculous event and must have breathed a sigh of relief that Sarah's pregnancy wasn't attributed to him.

"And the child grew and was weaned" [vs. 8]. *Gadal* is the verb for "grew" which implies getting larger, and *gamal* the verb for "weaned" which fundamentally means to do or give someone anything either good or bad. "He had dealt bountifully with me" [Ps 13.6]. Given Sarah's advanced age, she must have entrusted Isaac to the care of a female slave, not unusual. This verse continues with "Abraham made a great feast," understandably because the child survived the travails of birth, the first few years of life and now stood a greater chance of maturing into adulthood. *Mishteh*, the noun for "feast" which is derived from a verbal root meaning to drink, has obvious connotations. "He made a great feast for all his princes" [Est 1.3]. During this celebration Sarah was sitting there admiring her son Isaac, the center of attention. Then Ishmael came in, perhaps on his own being drawn there by the crowd, and spontaneously started to play with Isaac. Thoughts of the past rushed into Sarah's mind, that is, thoughts of Hagar the Egyptian whom the then-named Sarai gave to her husband to conceive a child. Although Sarah spotted Ishmael playing innocently on the tent floor, her attention was focused exclusively upon Hagar who was still around. After all, this was the first time the two were mentioned since Chapter Sixteen. The considerable time gap implies that Hagar remained Abraham's retinue and under his protection from Sarah. While the three mysterious visitors were with him at the oaks of Mamre, one must have sought out Hagar to speak with her and identify himself as having rescued her in the desert when Sarai banished her. The angel encouraged Hagar to remain with Abraham and not return to Egypt because Ishmael's future would be much better off if she didn't.

During the feast when everyone was having a wonderful time the face of aged Sarah suddenly blanched when she got up and went looking for her old nemesis. If her son was present, Hagar was close by. It must have been equally embarrassing for Abraham who kept Hagar hidden all this time. "Cast out this slave woman with her son" [vs. 10] were the predictable words from Sarah to her husband. These

words echo ones spoken earlier: “Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her” [16.6]. This experience must have been a genuine nightmare for both women as a regurgitation of the past. *Garash* is the verb for “cast out” which applies to some type of offense or expulsion of people from their native land. It’s first use is when the Lord had driven out the man from the garden of Eden (cf. 3.24). Thus *garash* is harsh, swift punishment which for Sarah was a way to get Hagar out of her life permanently and as soon as possible. The bone of contention was, of course, that only one child could be heir even if the other was born to a slave. Abraham’s response is understandable: “And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son” [vs. 11]. The verb for “displeasing” is *rahaḥ* which fundamentally means to make a loud noise and more commonly, to do evil; the noun for “thing” is *davar*, the verbal root for “to speak.” In other words, strong words for a vexing situation. “When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand upon the head of Ephraim, it displeased him” [48.17]. The sense of *rahaḥ* is heightened in the Hebrew text by addition of “in his eyes” or in his sight, that what Abraham was confronted with was utterly repelling and reminiscent of when Hagar fled. At that time Abram had nothing to do with this; Sarai made life so difficult for Hagar that she took it into her own hands to head for the desert.

Fortunately this time the Lord intervened which intimates that he was watching what had been transpiring all along. “Be not displeased because of the lad and because of your slave woman” [vs. 12]. Wisely God counsels Abraham not to hold this “evil” not just before his eyes but as the text reads literally, “in his eyes.” Abraham is advised to follow his wife and let Hagar and her son Ishmael go. After all, God “will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring” [vs. 13]. These words are reminiscent of the angel to Hagar, “He shall be a wild ass of a man...and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen” [16.12]. Fortunately Abraham didn’t hear the words which the angel kept from him. Despite the divine care for Ishmael, the Lord was more concerned for the well-being of Isaac and tacitly was on Sarah’s side because “through Isaac shall your descendants be named.” The Lord knew from previous experience that Abraham had a weakness for those less fortunate, having engaged him in a bargaining match over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. This time around Abraham was determined not to repeat the mistake of Hagar’s first banishment. Therefore he prepared food...not just that but vs. 14 says in a touching way that Abraham took food and water “putting it on her should along with the child.”

“And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beer-sheba” [vs. 15]. Earlier Hagar had a destination, Egypt, for that was where she came from when Abraham bought her during his exile there due to the famine in Canaan. Her first destination had been Shur which was not far from Egypt and south of Beer-sheba. This second time Hagar had no such goal because she was too discouraged from Sarah’s continued abuse and thus wandered about, the verb being *tahah* which applies to going astray. “Do not they err who devise evil” [Prov 14.22]? As for Beer-sheba, it is in the Negev Desert probably not far from Shur. Perhaps Hagar wished to re-trace her steps to Egypt via Shur but was simply too depressed to find her way. Besides the desert’s normal perils, Hagar was at the mercy of roving bands of robbers and all sorts of undesirables. “She cast the child under one of the bushes” [vs. 15]. The verb here is *shalach* which is rather forceful and indicative of Hagar’s near despair. We get the impression that she saw a bush and flung Ishmael in its direction, hopefully to land in its shade. She intended to do pretty much the same any minute, getting far away enough so her son wouldn’t follow after her. “Then she went and sat down over against him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot” [vs. 16]. The words “over against” are *mineged*, literally as “from before” and that was a bowshot away, a poetic image for a desperate situation. Hagar would have been hurt too deeply to see Ishmael come running toward her which in turn, would make her move further away, but she too was exhausted in the desert heat. As for the RSV text, it runs “the child lifted up his voice and wept” whereas the Hebrew has “she lifted up her voice and wept.” Regardless, the situation at hand is a genuine tragedy.



“And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven” [vs. 17]. First comes God who heard Ishmael’s weeping as noted in the previous verse followed by his angel who called (*qara*’) to her. Both God and his angel are in heaven, that is, above looking down, from which they see her plight. That doesn’t mean they had been inattentive earlier. After all, this must have been the same angel or *mal’ak* who found Hagar “by a spring of water in the wilderness” [16.7]. The presence of God this time shows the urgency of the situation, that this is the second occasion Hagar had to endure debasing humiliation at the hands of Sarah. Only this time the *mal’ak* didn’t meet her in the desert but called from heaven. We have no intimation that Hagar expected to be rescued yet again by a heavenly being; perhaps she rehearsed this desire in her mind at first for her and her son but let it pass quickly when she cast Ishmael under the bush. The angel called out, “What troubles you, Hagar” [vs. 17]? The Hebrew reads literally “what to you, Hagar?,” words intended more to get her attention to that voice from heaven. He proceeds with “for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is” [vs. 18], that is, under the bush a bowshot away from her yet within her hearing distance. The *mal’ak* tells Hagar to get up and grasp him because “I will make him a great nation.” That is to say, the angel is fulfilling his function as messenger by speaking in God’s name.

Hagar doesn’t respond to these encouraging words but requires being aroused from her depression and exhaustion: “Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water” [vs. 19]. These words intimate that despite her condition and lack of response, she did pay attention to the *mal’ak* and saw the well of water. Chances are that it wasn’t there earlier, but the *mal’ak* dug it before Hagar opened her eyes. “And God was with the lad, and he grew up” [vs. 20] to become a wild ass of a man as noted in 16.12. No small wonder that this experience made him rebellious as well as toughened him up at an early age, that “every man’s hand was against him” as that verse continues. At that place was a well called Beer-lahai-roi which wasn’t divinely dug, if you will, but already present (cf. 16.14). As for the well at hand, it has no name and disappeared as soon as Hagar got sufficient water for her and her son. The text doesn’t say what happened to Hagar after this except later in 25.12 that she was the mother of Ishmael. Hagar remained in the wilderness rearing her son which is in tune with vs. 20: “he lived in the wilderness of Paran” in the northeast section of the Sinai desert. Being an Egyptian, Hagar returned there after Ishmael grew up and was able to fend for himself and later brought him a wife from that country (cf. vs. 21). Being close to her native Egypt, Hagar at long last decided to return there, glad to be rid of Sarah. Perhaps her twice-bitter experience influenced people at home and worked its way into legend which contributed to the hostile attitude the Egyptians showed Israel later in history. Then the city-bred Israelites had to contend with Ishmael’s descendants while wandering in the Sinai desert, for they too inherited stories about how Sarah mistreated their ancestral mother.

The scene now shifts to Abraham’s relationship with King Abimelech last seen in Chapter Twenty which begins with “at that time (*heth*),” the time of Hagar’s second banishment just recorded. He got wind of this and was curious about how God intervened on behalf of Hagar and Ishmael taking up residence in the wilderness of Paran. This could pose a threat to his authority later on, so naturally Abimelech used it as a pretense to visit Abraham. After all, Abimelech abducted his wife and was familiar with how she operated. To be on the safe side, Abimelech now meets Abraham with the commander of his army, Phicol, who later deals with Isaac (cf. 26.26). Just the fact that Abimelech came with his chief military figure was threatening enough even though the king greeted Abraham with “God is with you in all that you do” [vs. 22]. With tongue in cheek he must have added that God was with Sarah, and that despite her advanced age, was a woman to reckon with. Abimelech proceeds to say to Abraham “swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my offspring or with my posterity” [vs. 23]. *Shavah* is the verb for “swear” and reads literally in the Hebrew, “swear in (*b-*) God,” that is, make an oath fully present in God which allows for no wiggle room. The content

of this oath is that Abraham will not “deal falsely” or *shaqar* which also means to lie. “Surely they are my people, sons who will not deal falsely” [Is 63.8]. Abimelech asks that this lack of *shaqar* apply to him, his offspring and his posterity, that is, for continuation of his kingdom. *Nyn* is the word for “offspring,” a word with two other references in the Bible, Job 18.19 and Is 14.22; the former is quoted here: “He has no offspring or descendant among his people, and no survivor where he used to live.” As for “posterity” (*neked*), two other references are found, equally in Job 18.19 and Is 14.22; “descendant” the word at hand.

Continuing in vs. 23, Abimelech reminds Abraham: “but as I have dealt loyally with you, you will deal with me and with the land where you have sojourned.” While the king is saying all this, in the background was Phicol, command of Abimelech’s army standing by to intimidate Abraham not so much by words but by his presence. *Chesed* is the word (noun) at hand for “loyally” last used in Abimelech’s presence when dealing with Sarah: “This is the kindness you must do me” [20.13]. Not only does Abimelech ask Abraham to show *chesed* to him but to the land or *‘erets* in which he had sojourned. That land, of course, was Gerar (cf. 20.2) of which Abimelech was king. Abraham had no choice but to comply and says simply, “I will swear” [vs. 24].

With that rather tense situation out of the way, vs. 25 moves on to another incident which may or may not have taken at the same time, that is, a well Abimelech’s servants had seized. *Yakach* is the verb for “complained” which connotes arguing and more fundamentally, a desire to be in the forefront at any costs. For another meaning, see 2Sam 7.14: “I will chasten him with the rod.” Was that well the one which the angel of the Lord created to save Hagar and Ishmael in the desert (cf. vs. 19)? Perhaps. After all, Hagar was wandering in the wilderness of Beer-sheba (cf. vs. 14). Note that the incident at hand follows right after that one as the words “at that time” intimate. In the verse at hand, *gazal* for “seized” is a rather strong word. “For he has crushed and abandoned the poor, he has seized a house which he did not build” [Job 20.19]. Regardless of the disputed well, it wasn’t an occasion for Abraham to demonstrate *chesed* but just indignation.

The response of Abimelech to Abraham’s complaint reads as follows: “I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today” [vs. 26]. *Davar* (whose verbal root means ‘to speak’) is the word for “thing,” the same noun last used in vs. 11. Although Abraham responds right away by giving the king sheep and oxen, he wasn’t sure whether to trust him, given his earlier experience with the abduction of Sarah and even though that incident proved Abimelech’s innocence. Nevertheless, the two “made a covenant” [vs. 27] which reads literally “cut a covenant.” In a moment it will spelled out by an offering presumably with Phicol looking on as surety for Abimelech. The king knew what a covenant was about—not the one of circumcision belonging to Abraham and given him by God—but an agreement of binding...cutting...force between two parties. Once this cutting has been agreed to, Abraham makes the first move. He sets apart (*yatsav*: to stand, take a stand) seven ewe lambs as a witness that he had dug the well (cf. vs. 30), *hedah* being the word which also can apply to a precept: “Take away from me their scorn and contempt, for I have kept your testimonies” [Ps 119.22].

As for the name of that place (*maqom* is used in vs. 31), it’s Beer-sheba or Well of Seven which alternately translates as Well of the Oath due to the word *shavah* used as recently as vs. 23 (‘now therefore swear to me here by God’). *Shavah* also is the verbal root for seven as in vs. 29, the seven ewe lambs for sacrifice. No small wonder that the well which had been in dispute and apparently had not yet been named now receives a name with the fundamental meaning of “seven” as a sacred number, connoting an oath and the cutting of a covenant. The army commander Phicol was present all along as stated clearly in vs. 32 when he accompanied his king home to the land of the Philistines. An historical

footnote: this is the first mention of Philistines who came to Canaan after 1,200 BC. To cap off this most significant event with a native king, Abraham plants a tamarisk tree (‘*eshel*) in Beer-sheba. Only two other references to ‘*eshel* are found, both in First Samuel (22.6 & 31.13). The most notable characteristic of a tamarisk tree is that it thrives when cut; the more this is done, the bushier it becomes.

Once Abraham had planted this special tree, he “called on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God” [vs. 33]. *Holam* is the word for “everlasting” and applies to the future. “His name shall endure forever” [Ps 72.17]. This word had been applied earlier, for example, to the covenant with Abraham (cf. 17.13). Despite this calling or *qara*’, the same verb used by the angel to Hagar (cf. 21.17), Abraham gets no response. Perhaps this *qara*’ was one of spontaneous shouting out his gratitude for making peace with a king of Canaan which fit in nicely with the long-awaited birth of his son, Isaac. That’s why Chapter Twenty-One concludes on a note of satisfaction, “And Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines.” The words “many days” are amazing in and by themselves with Abraham at a hundred years old. Despite this positive conclusion, still the word “sojourned” (*gur*) is used, that since his departure from Haran many years earlier he remains and will continue to remain a foreigner. Making that *gur* native, so to speak, isn’t Abraham’s task. It belongs to his descendants.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

“After these things God tested Abraham.” In many ways this testing (*nasah*) of a one hundred year old man and his wife who left everything to sojourn in a foreign land is outlandish...completely unfair...given all that they had undergone thus far. As for the verb *nasah*, another reference is Eccl 7.23: “All this I have tested by wisdom.” As for the testing, God calls Abraham by his proper name here for the first time in order to see how he would respond. The calling is done interiorly, not through Abraham’s physical ears, given his advanced age. Immediately came the response, “Here am I” with *hineh*, more or less as “behold,” the last occasion being 18.2. God must have been taken aback at such a quick response from a man on the verge of death. Once the initial shock of surprise wore off, God proceeds with his *nasah* or testing, all the while not missing a beat: “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering.” He adds the phrase “only son” along with “whom you love” almost as a two-fold jab at Abraham as well as Sarah, Isaac having been born in their late old age. Isaac is to be the victim of a burnt offering or *holah*, the last occurrence of that word was with Noah: “Noah built an altar to the Lord...and offered burnt offerings on the altar” [8.20]. Surely Abraham must have recalled that incident of long ago within the larger context of the Lord promising never to destroy the world by a flood. If that *holah* prevented such a catastrophe, perhaps the offering of the young Isaac might be worth it.

Though we don’t hear from Sarah throughout this drama, she must have been devastated. Abraham didn’t come right out and express the purpose of his trip to Moriah, but intuitively Sarah realized something ominous was brewing. Though each may not have communicated their feelings to each other, both must have wondered about how God treats his favorites when they’re advanced in age and living in a land not their own. The place of offering will be in the land of Moriah whose exact place is uncertain, but in 2 Chron 3.1 is identified with Jerusalem: “Then Solomon began to build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah where the Lord had appeared to David his father.” Solomon must have been mindful of Jerusalem/Moriah and its associated with the proposed sacrifice of his predecessor, Abraham. If it weren’t for Abraham’s obedience, Solomon would not be king, simple as that. Note that God says “upon one of the mountains of Moriah” indicating that Moriah is hilly. As for its distance from Abraham’s current location, nothing is said. One other clue as to Moriah as possibly Jerusalem...it was Melchizedek of Salem who had met Abram back in 14.18-20. With that in mind, Abraham would have been familiar with the way to Salem.

“So Abraham rose early in the morning,” *shakam* (it had been used earlier on a number of occasions) being the verb here in vs. 3 which means to put a load upon a beast of burden. The noun *shekem* derived from it bears this out as meaning shoulder. Abraham didn’t set out alone with Isaac but brought along “two of his young men” or members of his household. Being young (*nahar*) means that they could have been born into Abraham’s household since his arrival in Canaan and were natives of that land or were descendants of the original settlers who departed Haran with the then-named Abram. Because Isaac was relatively young, Abraham didn’t tell him the purpose of this journey but may have informed the two young men, having vowed them to absolute secrecy. As part of Abraham’s household, they witnessed enough unusual events in their young lives so as to mature them quickly. The second half of vs. 3 says that Abraham “cut the wood for the burnt offering” meaning he had done it before setting out. Either the wood from that place was special or the place of offering lacked it. Once this had been done, the part set off “to the place of which God had told him,” *maqom* being the noun and signifying as noted above as a spot different from all others.

“On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place afar off” [vs 4]. One can only speculate what Abraham discussed with his son as well with as the two young men, especially at night around the campfire. The demeanor of the two servants and their relative silence may have clued in Isaac that something out of the ordinary was about to happen, and the fact that his father had cut wood at home was quite unusual even for a young boy not to miss. “Lifted up his eyes” can signify Abraham’s advanced age having walked for three full days or his concentration upon the task at hand. Knowing his character well by now, the latter is more applicable. Between the point of leaving and now Abraham hadn’t a clue as to his destination, just that it was Moriah/Jerusalem or as noted earlier in connection with Abraham’s earlier meeting with Melchizedek, the land of Salem. As for the time of the third day when God singled out Mariah as a *maqom* for Abraham’s benefit, chances are it was in the evening. During that time the desert heat relinquished its mirages, so one could pick out various landmarks more clearly and without fear of being deceived. Although vs. 2 says that God will inform Abraham as to the *maqom*, we don’t have him saying it here at this critical juncture, just that Abraham drew the proper association between his original command and what his eyes now beheld.

What was to take place now was strictly between father and son, hence the reason for Abraham bidding the two young men to stay behind with the ass (cf. vs. 5). These two knew what was about to happen and were relieved they didn’t have to ascend the mountain with Abraham and Isaac and witness what was about to transpire. They were anxious to see if Abraham had the nerve to accomplish the sacrifice of his son easily revealed by the expression on his face upon descending the mountain. Abraham’s words to them (‘we’ or I and my son ‘will go yonder and worship’) were code words, if you will, to the two young men in order not to frighten Isaac. *Shachah* is the verb for “worship” and was used in 18.2: “and bowed himself to the earth.” And so Abraham was familiar with this gesture of reverence physically demonstrated as a bow to the ground. He told the two young men that he was going to do something similar, only this time to God. It’s important because in this verse we have the first use of the term “worship” as giving God reverence. Isaac overheard his father saying these words, so he figured that he will participate in this obeisance to the Lord which he heard about from those in his father’s household pertaining to the three mysterious visitors.

“Then Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son” [vs. 6]. Isaac wouldn’t be surprised at this, given the advanced age of his father (Abraham easily could have been his grandfather). It was much easier to carry the fire than the wood, fire Abraham had taken from last night’s camp, and had to maintain the embers carefully so they would be extinguished. For a man a hundred years old attempting to do this while ascending a mountain is no mean feat. As for the word



“knife,” it’s derived from the common verb to eat meaning a utensil for eating no so much for making sacrifice though both can apply. During the ascent Isaac expressed his surprise as well as alarm with “My father!” Abraham responded by saying that he was right there knowing full-well that his son was getting nervous the further they moved on and away from the two servants back at camp. Isaac points out the obvious, that he is carrying wood for the sacrifice and his father, the fire to ignite it. However, what made Isaac uneasy was the lack of sacrificial victim which ordinarily they would have brought along from the very beginning.

“God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son” [vs 8]. The verb here is *ra’ah* which means “to see” and intimates the name of the place of the intended sacrifice noted later. *Ra’ah* isn’t used often in this sense though refer to 1Sam 16.1: “I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.” Both instances are a kind of foreseeing, or knowing what will happen in the future, small comfort for Isaac whose anxiety must have increased since his father uttered these words of half-hearted consolation. Vs. 8 has a second sentence which emphasizes this theme of impending doom: “So they went both of them together.”

“When they came to the place (*maqom*) of which God had told him” [vs. 9]. This corresponds to vs. 2, “upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.” At first Abraham was confronted with a number of mountains; it was only when he reached the area that God pointed out the specific *maqom*. So here is Abraham at the time of telling, if you will, which isn’t spelled out but intimated. Right away Abraham sets about to construct an altar (*mizbeach*), the last one being at the oaks of Mamre at Hebron (cf. 13.18) after he had walked throughout “the length and the breadth of the land” [vs. 17]. Surely Abraham had in mind that experience some years back, but the earlier altar was the occasion of joy at having seen the land promised him. Now he builds an altar to sacrifice his only-begotten son (Ishmael born to Hagar is a kind of half-son) who had been promised what seemed to him a countless number of times. He goes about constructing this altar in a matter-of-fact way with no regrets, the same attitude he demonstrated many times ever since his departure from his native Haran.

Again in a matter-of-fact way Abraham “bound his son and laid him on the altar, upon the wood” [vs. 10]. The verb for “bound” is *haqad*, the only use in the Bible from which is derived the adjective *haqod* (speckled): “all the she-goats that were speckled and spotted” [31.35], apparently because the marks resembled strings or ropes around the she-goats. Of course, Abraham first had to take the wood from Isaac’s shoulders after which he put him upon it. Isaac says nothing, pretty much imitating that matter-of-fact attitude as his father, despite having been bound. The words of the next verse, “Then Abraham put forth (*shalach*) his hand” are quite dramatic and occur seconds before he is to slay his son, the verb *shachat* (rhyming with *shalach*) which isn’t to be confused with a verb of similar spelling as noted in conjunction with 13.10 and 19.13. *Shachat* as used in the verse at hand applies more specifically to slaying animals for offerings to the Lord. “Two tables on which the burnt offering and the sin offering and the guilt offering were to be slaughtered” [Ezk 40.39]. The fast tempo of this narrative is conveyed by each sentence beginning with the word *w-* (‘and’ or ‘then’) prefaced to the beginning of these sentences. Although this has been the case with virtually every sentence thus far in Genesis, it assumes greater importance as in these tense situations.

“But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven” [vs. 11]. As noted in the last paragraph regarding *w-*, it translates also here as “but.” The Lord doesn’t do the calling (*qara*’) but his messenger or *mal’ak*, the same word applied to those three mysterious visitors to Abraham shortly before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Chances are that indeed it was one of these messenger who had watched Abraham since they met under the oaks of Mamre in 18.1, standing by watching the drama unfold until the very last minute. The Lord himself may have consented to Abraham actually slaying

his son Isaac, but the unnamed *mal'ak* did not, having been the recipient of Abraham's hospitality along with his two companions. The *mal'ak* addressed Abraham twice by name from heaven or from above the scene on top of Mount Moriah. Upon hearing his name called out from above him, Abraham says "Here I am" [vs. 11], *hineh* being used as "behold" just like he had done a few minutes earlier in vs. 7 to his son.

"I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" [vs. 12]. The verb for "fear" is *yare'* which connotes having reverence, of holding God before one's eyes. God must have been thinking of Abraham's earlier observation in 20.11 with regard to Abimelech, "There is no fear of God at all in this place." Abraham knew what this *yare'* consisted of, that he was able to discern its lack, which implies that he had it in the back of his mind all along. The angel uses *yare'* in that Abraham had no hesitation to offer his "only son" or *yachyd*, this noun being related to the adjective meaning "one." "Turn to me and be gracious to me; for I am lonely and afflicted" [Ps 25.16]. Here "lonely" uses *yachyd* as literally "only one." Though attention is focused upon the dialogue between Abraham and God, Isaac must have heard these words and obviously was greatly relieved. As soon as the order not to slay Isaac was given, "Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram" [vs. 13]. This is the second time Abraham had lifted up his eyes, the last being when he saw "the place afar off" [vs. 4]. In both instances Abraham's attention was elsewhere and had to be directed to the situation at hand. He was so astonished at the close call at almost having slain his *yachyd* that he missed the ram caught in the thicket. The ram was caught before Abraham bound Isaac and placed him on the altar, and despite it making commotion, he was completely unaware of its presence.

"So Abraham called the name of that place the Lord will provide" [vs. 14]. Here's another instance of *maqom* (place) in reference to a specific spot, in effect, renaming Mount Moriah. The Hebrew for "will provide" reads "he will see," *ra'ah* being the verb as noted in vs. 8: "God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering." Thus Mount Moriah was transformed in something like Mount the Lord Will See. Since the future tense is used, that implies future generations will come to the same mount...the same *maqom*...and will come under this divine gaze but under the condition that one must be prepared to sacrifice that which is most dear.

Vs. 15 has the angel or messenger (*mal'ak*) of the Lord calling Abraham a second time though without mentioning him by name. Between the first calling (by proper name) and now Abraham had offered the ram. The *mal'ak* speaks as God's mouthpiece, as God himself, without the two being identified as one person: "By myself I have sworn, because you have done this" [vs. 16]. The verb for "sworn" is *shavah* which is used in 21.24 when Abraham swears to Abimelech about giving him loyalty. For the Lord to *shavah* is a momentous occasion, and the angel speaking as the Lord acts as a witness to this oath made to Abraham. Also it is a surety for Abraham that no more will he be subject to trials. There follows the *shavah*, words quite familiar to Abraham but in a wholly different context, without fear of being disappointed at so many delays: "I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore" [vs. 17]. "Indeed" is a way of expressing certainly which in Hebrew is done by a doubling of the verb. In the case at hand it reads, albeit awkwardly in English, "blessing I will bless you," *barak* being the verb. To repeat a verb like this indicates the impartation of a guarantee or promise that cannot be broken. The multiplication of descendants stems from those children yet to be born of Isaac. Not only will their number increase dramatically, but they "shall possess the gates of their enemies" as vs. 17 concludes. Though "enemies" applies to future threats, Abraham couldn't help but recall Abimelech, a native king of Canaan, and the difficulties he experienced with him.

This blessing by the Lord in the person of his *mal'ak* or messenger concludes all the divine

communications with Abraham which he instinctively realized not as being cut off but as a fulfilment of all he had suffered since his departure from Haran. The added bonus: “by your descendants shall all the nations (*goy*) of earth (*‘erets*) bless themselves because you have obeyed my voice” [vs. 18]. The verb for “obeyed” is *shamah*, the common one for hearing, certainly true of Abraham since he departed Haran. Not only was he obedient but as pointed out several times earlier, quite matter-of-fact about it, showing no hesitation nor anguished doubt. So when nations bless themselves in Abraham’s name, they are doing this in him as father of nations which is the meaning of his name.

So Abraham returned to his young men” [vs. 19]. This returning is reminiscent of Moses later descending Mount Sinai to the Israelites, a kind of foreshadowing of that event. It might be tempting to think that the two young men had spied on Abraham on top of Mount Moriah, but that is inconceivable given the gravity of the situation and commanding presence of Abraham himself. They saw father and son ascent the mountain with all the elements for a sacrifice minus the most important ingredient of them all, a sacrificial victim. It didn’t take much for the servants to put two and two together and were relieved when Abraham and Isaac had returned to camp. While journeying to Beersheba, the place where Abraham took up residence (cf. vs. 19), the servants kept a discreet silence and even distance from father and son. They didn’t know what occurred on Moriah nor was it for them to know until later. As for Beersheba, there Abraham had planted a tamarisk tree and “called on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting Lord” [21.33]. Before that, Abraham and Sarah resided in an unspecified place within the territory controlled by King Abimelech so had to send on one or both of the young men to Sarah in order to bring her there.

Chapter Twenty-Two concludes with the remaining five verses giving the descendants of Abraham’s brother, Nahor, in order to introduce the father of Rebekah, wife of Isaac. In other words, these verses have in mind the offspring of Abraham to continue and fulfill the Lord’s many promises of about descendants to Abraham. Apparently Nahor had remained in Haran all the while Abraham had wandered throughout Canaan plus his unintended detour into Egypt. Each must have kept in touch with each other over many years (we have no idea of his age...advanced like Abraham?) though nothing is said if they ever reunited.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

This chapter begins with the death of Abraham’s wife: “Sarah lived a hundred and twenty-seven years” to which is added in the same verse “these were the years of the life of Sarah.” The intent is first give the age of Sarah (127 years) followed by an invitation to recall the various details about her life beginning with 12.5, “And Abram took Sarai his wife...and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan.” This is followed by vs. 2 with “And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan.” Kiriath-arba translates as City of Arba with *kiriah* as a more poetic word, thus giving more class to a city than the more common *hyr*: “Mount Zion in the far north, the city of the great king” [Ps 48.2].

The death of Sarah is important not just because she was Abraham’s wife but because she was the first of the recorded pioneers from Haran who had died and was buried in Canaan. With her gone, Abraham suffered a terrible loss though it was to be expected. As vs. 2 continues, “and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.” The common verb *bu*’ is used which in this instance can refer either to that tent which faithfully served Abraham and Sarah all their years of wandering in Canaan as well as into Egypt. There he mourned, *saphad* meaning to beat the breast in lamentation. “A time to mourn and a time to dance” [Eccl 3.4]. Abraham did this alone all the while recounting the trials, tribulations as well as joys that had taken place within that tent, not to mention the countless places it had been encamped. Abraham would never feel at home in that tent again yet it remained his only link

to his wife as well as to Haran, a portable home enlivened in their advanced age by the presence of Isaac.

“And Abraham rose up from before his dead and said to the Hittites” [vs. 3]. This verse indicates that Abraham had exited the tent after an extended period of time during which the natives of the area had gathered. They heard about Sarah’s death and wanted to pay their respects. They retained some fear of Abraham after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, he having interceded with God on their behalf but to no avail. If something evil should befall them, they would have Abraham on their side as an intercessor even though it didn’t pan out well for the two cities. This is the second time the Hittites are mentioned, the first being in 15.20 as included among a while slew of other local tribes whose land the Lord said “to your descendants I give this land.” Surely word of that promise got out quickly among the Hittites and others, striking fear into them. If not, they could have consumed Abraham’s relatively small band.

With a combination of defiance and confidence Abraham addressed the Hittites, “I am a stranger and a sojourner among you” [vs. 4]. *Ger* is the word for “stranger” and *toshav* for “sojourner,” both now elevated to the status of a divine calling after so many years of wandering. “Know of a surety that your descendants will be sojourners (*ger*, not the latter term is used here) in a land that is not theirs” [12.13]. As for *toshav*, it derives from a verbal root meaning to sit down, remain. “For I am your passing guest, a sojourner, like all my fathers” [Ps 39.12]. In a sense, both are contradictory: an alien who has taken up residence yet at the same time is awaiting possession of the land through his descendants. Certainly the Hittites and others were aware of this and wished to defuse it without resorting to violence. “Give me property among you for a burying place, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.” *Achuzah* is the noun for “property” used throughout the Bible for a parcel of land belonging to someone and means something that has been seized but not necessarily by violence or deceit. This sense of land belonging to an individual or family is enhanced by the words “from among you” which reads more accurately in Hebrew, “from with you.” That is to say, give me, a stranger and sojourner, a parcel of land “from with you” or from your very essence. Though the Hittites may not have realized it, Abraham was asking in advance for the first piece of land that was promised to his descendants...a foothold into alien territory. It was a request the Hittites couldn’t refuse (or were afraid to decline), given Abraham’s loss at such an advanced age. Surely he wouldn’t pose a problem for them. Abraham was sensitive to this request which is why he said “out of my sight:” not because he wished Sarah’s grave, a constant reminder, to be invisible but to demonstrate his willingness to settle down and not to disturb anyone.

One wonders at this point how many of the original pioneers were left. Certainly just a handful, and their ability to absorb newcomers diminished as they advanced in age. Joining that group didn’t have the prospect of future advancement, that’s for sure. Perhaps there was a surge of popularity after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, but that was minor compared to what things stood now. Throughout all this no word is given about Isaac who must have been present and wondering how he, the first descendant, would fare in the near future. And Ishmael, let alone Hagar? They’ve passed off the scene though both must have monitored the situation closely. Hagar must have felt some glee at Sarah’s death, the woman who had treated her so badly on two occasions.

“Hear us, my lord; you are a mighty prince among us” [vs. 6]. *Nisy’* or “mighty prince” (often the adjective isn’t required) is a title Abraham didn’t assume but was applied by native inhabitants of Canaan who had followed his adventures over the years. The noun is derived from a verbal root meaning to lift up and was used with respect to Ishmael’s descendants (cf. 17.20). The preposition *betok* (‘among us’) suggests a being within, of accompaniment, which applies to Abraham by reason of his trust in the locals as well as they in him and his retinue. Then again, that story of his intercession



with the Lord on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah has become legendary in his own time, a story of a man who seemed even more merciful than God. Being considered a *nisy* earned Abraham the right to select “the choicest of our sepulchers” for his wife, Sarah. Within this same verse the Hittites add that not one of them will stand in the way which intimates that earlier they had experienced some tension with Abraham and rightly so, given that he was a foreigner moving among them.

Throughout all this Abraham played the part of a diplomat revealed by the words “If you are willing that I should bury my dead out of my sight” [vs. 8]. Abraham had in mind Ephron, the son of Zohar (vs. 8), someone who hadn’t been mentioned before but must have won Abraham’s confidence. Perhaps it was because Ephron lived “in Machpelah which was to the east of Mamre” [vs. 17] or in the vicinity where Abraham first settled and built an altar to the Lord (cf. 13.18). Ephron recalled this event as well as the appearance of the three mysterious visitors who came to Mamre en route to Sodom and Gomorrah (cf. 18.1). Thus Ephron must have been just as old as Abraham, virtually a life-long friend, and one who confessed the same God compared with his fellow Canaanites. Abraham requested that Ephron give him the cave of Machpelah which translates as Doubling (of a portion) or a place capable of having two or more tombs. Early on Abraham had eyes Machpelah as an ideal spot for his burial and that of Sarah simply because it was anchored near Mamre and that first altar he had raised.

Quickly Abraham wishes not to rely upon the generosity of the Hittites which later could work against him or better, his descendants, and the reason why he insisted upon “the full price as a possession for a burying place” [vs. 9]. All the while Abraham was attempting to wiggle out of the generosity of the Hittites there sat Ephron (cf. vs. 10) listening in. Both men had been aware of each other all along; in fact, Abraham may have invited Ephron to be present not so much to speak as he does now but to support him. This meeting took place “in the hearing of the Hittites, of all whom went in at the gate of his city” [vs. 10]. In other words, all had assembled at the city gate (which one isn’t specified; perhaps Hebron had just one), typical for such encounters. That mean it was outdoor or partially sheltered by the walls and in full sight of those entering and leaving the city. Besides, it had the added advantage of guards posted at the gate in case things got out of hand. To hold a meeting in such circumstances means it was in the most public of places, right there for any and all to observe, including foreigners who may be arriving or departing Hebron. Even in an extreme situation one of these foreigners could be pulled aside as an impartial witness.

With this in mind, Ephron addressed Abraham as “lord” or *adony* (vs. 11), a sign of respect not unlike *nisy* in vs. 6. Because of their long friendship, Ephron wishes to donate the cave of Machpelah in his field “in the presence of the sons of my people” [vs. 11]. Abraham’s response? He “bowed down before the people of the land” [vs. 12]. Here the proper name Hittites isn’t used; instead, Abraham identifies them as belonging to the land or *erets* which is an acknowledgment of their legitimacy and historical connection with Canaan. A wise ploy, to be sure, despite his long sojourn in the same *erets*, intended to offset the various promises by God that Abraham’s descendants would possess Canaan and therefore dispossess its native inhabitants. Given the nature of society at the time, the Hittites/Canaanites heard all about the possibility of Abraham’s descendants taking away their land. Nothing was said explicitly about Abraham doing it, so they were off the hook momentarily. Besides, Abraham was very old, and things could change for their betterment after his death. That desire for Abraham to pass off the scene may also have played a role in the cordiality of the Hittites with regard to Sarah’s tomb. With her dead, Abraham was sure to follow in short order.

And so the two old friends, Ephron and Abraham, bargain back and forth chiefly for the benefit of the Hittites and anyone else at the city gate. Finally when Ephron says that “a piece of land (is) worth four hundred shekels of silver” [vs. 14], a relatively large sum of money even among friends. “What is that

between you and me” [vs. 15] are the words relative to this which automatically settles the friendly dispute. And so “Abraham agreed with Ephron” [vs. 16] and paid him the required amount. That means Abraham came prepared with sufficient funds not just to bargain but to prevail. To further ratify the deal, this agreement was done “according to the weights current among the merchants” [vs. 16], merchants being attracted to city gates and setting up shop in that vicinity. Nothing is said about the immediate aftermath of the deal, simply that it had transpired peacefully. It is to the credit of both Abraham and Ephron that they retained their friendship which could have deteriorated quickly in the presence of so many people.

Vs. 17 describes the cave of Machpelah as “to the east of Mamre;” how far east isn’t specified but presumably close by to that altar Abraham had erected long ago. In addition to the field, Abraham got “all the trees that were in the field” which could have provided him with substantial income from either olive oil or fruit. Small words but very important because they mean that Abraham relinquished his wandering ways throughout Canaan and settled permanently in Hebron, his first love. The Hittites, of course, were keenly aware of this. Vs. 18 continues with the cave and trees as having been “made over to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the Hittites.” Not just them but “before all who went in at the gate of his city.” Identification of Hebron as “his city” (i.e., Abraham’s) is equally important as he having come into possession of the Machpelah. Not only did Abraham become sedentary but became the first fruits, as it were, of that divine promise to possess the land of Canaan. So despite the loss of Sarah, Abraham intuited that he had achieved the purpose laid upon him by God all those years ago when he left Haran for points unknown. The only task for Abraham was to find a wife for his son, Isaac.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

This is the last chapter which sees Abraham actively engaged in his life-long quest to establish a line of descendants which was destined to inherit the land of Canaan. Naturally enough, it deals with his second son, Isaac...second because Ishmael was born to Abraham through Hagar and for all purposes, passed off the scene despite an appearance here and there. “The Lord has blessed Abraham in all things.” A simple, general way to sum up the patriarch’s trials and tribulations, yet one more remained, the subject of this chapter.

It should be noted that the substantial contingent Abraham had assembled while in Canaan comprised the original settlers from Haran, those born to the group and others in Haran who heard of Abraham and wished to join him. Given the nature of Abraham’s calling, safely we can assume that no one from Canaan was a member except as a slave or loose associate, a camp follower of sorts. Although Abraham was the head of this household, some time ago he had delegated most authority to others simply because of his advanced age. Primary among those is the anonymous servant at hand, “the oldest of his house who had charge of all that he had.” Note that this man is the “oldest” which not necessarily would make him Abraham’s age since the age for underlings might have been measure differently. “Oldest” infers that this man had been with Abraham the longest, even if he had been born in Canaan but of Haran stock. The verb *mashal* is used for his task of caring for “all that he had” and means to have dominion. It was used first in 1.18, “(sun and stars) to rule over the day and over the night and to separate the light from the darkness.”

“Put your hand under my thigh.” Such concludes vs. 2 which continues into vs. 3, the form of oath Abraham enjoins upon his oldest servant. *Yarek* is the word for “thigh” and can be taken to represent genitals. Another reference is Ex 1.5 which reads literally, “Every soul which came out of the loins of Jacob.” As for the servant, he is asked to swear an oath by the reproductive capacity of Abraham now

almost withered away completely due to his advanced age—(however, Abraham would take another wife, 25.1!)—that he would abide by his master’s desire to make firmer the tenuous grasp on the land of Canaan by getting a wife for Isaac. The oath consists in not taking a wife “from the daughters of the Canaanites” which at this early stage in the hoped-for possession of Canaan would make the enterprise fail. It is among these people whom Abraham says that he dwells, *qerev* being the word which means in the midst of or right there among them. Despite this *qerev*, Abraham wishes to maintain a healthy distance which he has done thus far, no mean feat, and passes it on to his servant.

Despite the passage of many years, memory of his native Haran remained strong for Abraham as indicated by the words “but go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son, Isaac” [vs. 4]. Use of the words *‘erets* (country) and *moledeth* (kindred) show the constancy of Abraham’s attachment over the years to his homeland despite the good reception he had acquired during his stay in the land of Canaan. When considering a sentence like this, a certain latent hostility towards Canaan is discernable, that Abraham was there to do a job and get it done as quickly and effectively as possible. It was up to his son Isaac and succeeding generations to claim Canaan for their very own. They are native-born yet continued the practice of not mingling with the Canaanites, a habit rigorously instilled within them by Abraham. The anonymous servant understood his master well since presumably he had been with him from the beginning and knew full well what was going on. Also he could pick up on how the Canaanites responded to Abraham’s presence in their land...a trustworthy person yet at the same time veiled in mystery as to the real reason which had brought him there. Also it was more than likely that this man had a negative opinion of Abraham’s son by Hagar, Ishmael. That gave him added incentive to carry out the mission now being entrusted to him.

The trusted servant wisely brought up a potential objection for the future wife of Isaac, that she may not be willing to accompany him back to Canaan. In that case he raised the possibility of bringing Isaac to Haran which for him, despite his father’s roots, would be a foreign land. Wisely Abraham said “See to it that you do not take my son back there” [vs. 6]. That puts Isaac in a kind of in-between land: neither belonging to Haran nor to Canaan. If Isaac had returned, he might like what he saw and decide not to return to Canaan; hence, a critical link in the divine plan would be missing. Abraham repeats to his trusted servant the promise God had made to him, summoning him from Haran, and entrusting the land of Canaan not to him directly but starting with his son, Isaac. Now Abraham adds a new twist to the servant’s mission: “he will send his angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there” [vs., 7]. Abraham says this with some authority; chances are he invoked the Lord to send one of the three angels (*mal’ak*) who had met him by the oaks of Mamre (cf. 18.10) who obliged graciously to the request. Then again, that dialogue consisted of three angels becoming one man...a whole series of transformations that lends mystery to the interchange. If it had happened then, why not now with the servant returning to Haran? Note that the *mal’ak* is to go before the servant, not alongside him as a companion. That makes his task somewhat impersonal yet vital. Though Abraham specifically says that the servant is to take a wife for Isaac, he gives not details how this delicate task is to be effected. That’s where the *mal’ak* comes in, working invisibly “before” him. So after the dialogue between Abraham and the servant, the latter puts his hand under his master’s thigh to swear an oath. More accurately, he swore “concerning this matter,” *davar* being the word for “matter” which, as had been noted earlier, derives from the common verbal root “to speak” and suggests a matter which had been uttered between two people.

“He arose and went to Mesopotamia, to the city of Nahor” [vs, 10]. First these words are preceded by mention of a caravan of twelve camels bearing “choice gifts,” no mean amount of presents, which must have attracted plenty of attention both in Canaan and later in Haran. Obviously the presents were from Canaan and perhaps Egypt, things not readily available in that northern territory. ‘Aram is the word for

Mesopotamia, a proper name first mentioned in 10.22, a son of Shem who, in turn, was one of Noah's sons. That means 'Aram can trace itself all the way back to right after the flood, hence one reason for Abraham's constant affection for that land while he was roaming around in alien Canaan. Since 'Aram was a place colonized shortly after the worldwide disaster, no small wonder Abraham always felt in exile. As for 'Aram itself, it wasn't the servant who picked out that city but the *mala'k* who went before him. While en route there, the servant and *mal'ak* had to pitch tent numerous times. Both never shared the same space, the *mal'ak* always retaining some distance "before" the servant.

Finally Abraham's servant and the *mal'ak* reached the outskirts of Nahor where he rested "by the well of water at the time of evening" [vs. 11]. This was a wise decision because at such time in the cool of the day women went out "to draw water" in preparation for the next day's use. Hauling water, heavy as it is, was no mean feat and best done in the cool of twilight. It gave an ideal time for the servant to see all the younger women come out and wait for the *mal'ak* to pick out a suitable one to be Isaac's wife. Also evening is a better time to get a good look at these women compared to the bright light of day which would not throw into better relief their shape and faces. Evening light offered just the right amount of light and shade to get the proper impression. Besides, the woman didn't have on any make-up nor fancy clothes as they went about this strenuous work. Easily the servant and *mal'ak* could see who was among the stronger women by the way they lifted the water jars.

"O Lord, God of my master Abraham, grant me success today, I pray you, and show steadfast love to my master Abraham" [vs. 12]. After assessing the situation carefully, the servant—not the *mal'ak*—prays not just to the Lord but to the one of his master, Abraham. That means the servant could have been familiar with another divinity, even a local one from Canaan, yet at the *mal'ak*'s urging, invokes the one true God. Two words comprise "grant success:" *qara'* (to call, summon) and *lephney* (literally, 'to my face'). Thus we get something like "summon to my face" or make it a reality before me. The servant could have beseeched the *mal'ak* but knew he was not divinity. Not only does he call upon the God of Abraham but asks him to "show steadfast love" or *chesed* to his master, Abraham. Here the servant reveals his true nobility, of having as his highest priority Abraham's well-being which involved all those promises by God as to his descendants. *Chesed* is a well-known term yet difficult to translate adequately, usually equivalent to Christian *agape*. It was first noted here in 19.19 with regard to Lot beseeching the angels to save his life.

As for the position of the servant and *mala'k*, both were at the spring of water (cf. vs. 13) where he was visible to all the young women drawing water. The *mala'k*, of course, was invisible to these women although they must have taken notice of the stranger in their midst, especially at how he was eyeing them right there in the open. Apparently they weren't afraid but kept up their business of drawing water. As for the servant, we can detect a certain humor at the way he addresses the Lord: "Behold, I am standing by the spring of water." In other words, the sentiment here is something like, "Okay, here I am where I'm supposed to be. What shall I do now?" He expected an immediate answer, wanting to accomplish his mission and return with a wife for Isaac. The answer was about to come as vs. 14 states, for the maiden destined to be Isaac's bride soon was to respond positively to the servant's request for a drink of water. The servant knew this maiden was appointed for Isaac, the verb being *yakach* last noted in 21.25 with a different meaning: "When Abraham complained to Abimelech about a well of water." The sense of *yakach* is that of arguing with a desire to show proof, and that is evident in both instances. Such proof would be sure knowledge for Abraham's servant that the Lord had "shown steadfast love" or *chesed*, the same *chesed* he prayed for in vs. 12.

To show the immediacy of the response—and that with the help of the invisible angel—vs. 15 reads "Before he had done speaking." That is to say, Rebekah "came out with her water jar upon her



shoulder” before the servant ceased his communication with God. Perhaps she heard him conversing with either the Lord or the *mal’ak* and knew this man was special, that he was on a mission. Rebekah was no ordinary maiden but was related to Abraham himself. As had been noted above, the time of this encounter was evening, semi-light, when Rebekah’s form appeared all the more mysterious. That’s what vs. 16 intimates: “The maiden was very fair to look upon (in the evening twilight), a virgin, whom no man had known.” Actually Rebekah is called a *nahar*, the same word applicable to a boy, and also can translate as “servant.” The adverb *me’od* for “very” is used which more accurately means “excessively,” and is applied to the adjective “fair,” the common *tov* (good). The English “to look upon” in Hebrew is a noun, “sight.” And when the verb *yadah* (to know) is used in a context as this, invariably it applied to sexual intercourse. Note the detailed words of vs. 16: “She went down to the spring and filled her jar and came up.” At first glance nothing special but in the evening twilight, quite provocative, since these gestures meant Rebekah revealed the soundness of her body right out there for the servant to behold.

Rebekah went out her usual business of drawing water and conversed with Abraham’s servant quite openly despite her unfamiliarity with this stranger. Chances are by now the other maidens finished or preferred to put some distance between them and the stranger with many camels who unexpectedly showed up at their well. Rebekah standing her ground was proof enough that she was the divinely appointed bride for Isaac. When she had drawn water for the servant’s camels—after all they were loaded with gifts but Rebekah didn’t know it yet—the servant continued pondering her: “The man gazed at her in silence to learn whether the Lord had prospered his journey or not” [vs. 21]. The verb for “gazed” is *sh’ah* which fundamentally means “to lay desolate,” the sense seeming to be that one is suddenly stunned by a sight or even, so much so that all a person can do is just gaze or wonder at what had occurred. “Until cities lie waste without inhabitant and houses without men, and the land is utterly desolate” [Is 6.11; used twice in the same verse]. Taking *sh’ah* in the sense applied to Abraham’s servant, we can say that he was utterly bowled over by Rebekah’s beauty. Modifying *sha’h* is *macharyth* (“in silence”), whose verbal root is *charash* meaning to cut into, to plow, be deaf. Thus *charash* is an intense sort of verb where silence is cut deep within a person—plowed within him or her—creating an intense gaze or wonder which precludes all thoughts and words. “And they despised him and brought him no present. But he held his peace” [1Sam 12.27]. From the *charash* maintained by the servant he was able to discern, again with the help of the invisible angel, the situation. *Yadah* is the verb for “to learn” already mentioned which retains here the sense of intimate knowledge, not just a casual or intellectual grasp of the situation. *Tsalach* or “prospered” is the object of his mission which connotes the falling upon of an event, usually in the positive sense. “And he shall make his way prosperous” [Is 48.15]. *Tsalach* refers to the servant’s journey (*derek*: road, way) which in essence already has prospered by reason of the angel which went before him (cf. vs. 7).

“When the camels had done drinking, the man took a gold ring weighing a half shekel and two bracelets for her arms” [vs. 22]. Such was the action that followed right after the servant “gazed at (Rebekah) in silence,” for this was a sign indicative that the Lord had prospered his journey. That time when Rebekah was watering the camels seemed an eternity, for the servant realized from the start that this was the maiden destined for Isaac. However, he had to wait until she completed the task in order to make certain, and by this time it must have been full night time. Rebekah was in awe at the two pieces of jewelry and figured that if they came from those camels, they must be carrying an endless amount of gifts. So once the anonymous servant drew out the ring and bracelets—they must have looked exceedingly attractive in the near darkness—he asked about her father and if he could stay the night with him. Right away Rebekah told the man and said “We have both straw and provender enough and room to lodge in” [vs. 25].

This readiness to care for a complete stranger when it was almost total darkness impressed the servant so much that right then and there before Rebekah he “bowed his head and worshiped the Lord” [vs. 26]. She must have been astonished at this gesture yet hadn’t a clue it was related directly to her future, that she was destined to leave her native land. The servant’s spontaneous prayer re-echoes his words in vs. 12 about the Lord showing *chesed* to his master, Abraham. However, he does add “As for me, the Lord has led me in the way to the house of my master’s kinsmen” [vs. 27]. The words “as for me” (in Hebrew ‘I in the way the Lord has led me’) are revealing, showing the modesty and faithfulness of this anonymous servant which had been evident from the beginning of his mission. Having been led “in the way” (*derek*) hearkens back to the “journey” of vs. 21. Now that a major step had been accomplished, the servant had to figure out the best way of making known the purpose of his mission and confronting Rebekah’s family whom he has yet to meet.

“Rebekah had a brother whose name was Laban; and Laban ran out to the man, to the spring” [vs. 29]. Note it was a brother, not Rebekah’s father, who met the man, and Laban would later prove a thorn in the side for Isaac’s son, Jacob. What made Laban run was his having seen the ring and bracelets on his sister. Immediately he knew this was some one very rich or a representative of a power man and wanted to take advantage of him should the occasion arise. By no means did Laban wish to have the man standing alone with his camels in the near total darkness. “Come in, O blessed of the Lord” [vs. 31]. Given Laban’s character which became evident in his attempt to cheat Jacob, these words are not so much recognition of the servant’s status as “blessed” (*baruk*; from *barak* noted earlier) though it was true objectively. Laban took over from his sister by caring for the camels and getting a place ready for the servant whose name, by the way, never do we know. Despite the food placed before him, this incredibly faithful man says that he will “not eat until I have told my errand” [vs. 33], the Hebrew for errand being *davar*, the same word as in vs. 9: “and swore to him (Abraham) concerning this matter.” So when the servant speaks, he is speaking about that which had been communicated to him, the verbal root *davar* being both used and implied throughout.

Unwittingly the servant starts to reveal both his mission and something about his master, Abraham. Unwittingly in that he does so without knowing Laban’s character which, by the way, is prevented from getting its way by the participation of other family members in the decision of Rebekah to leave her home and family. One can only imagine how attentive is Laban when the servant speaks of Abraham’s possessions (silver and gold, men servants and maid servants, camels and asses). Though later in vs. 50 Bethuel is mentioned (Rebekah’s father) from the time the servant had met Rebekah until now, Laban appears to be the only person speaking with him. What of Rebekah and Bethuel? Was Laban the family spokesman or even its head? Anyway, the servant continues with a description of his mission of not taking “a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites in whose land I dwell” [vs. 37]. Chances are not so much Laban but Bethuel had heard about Abraham’s exploits, especially as related to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Both men would know the servant was telling the truth about their long-lost relative if his story jibed with their report which it did.

Particularly impressive to the two hosts must have been the words “the Lord, before whom I walk, will send his angel with you and prosper your way” [vs., 40]. Compare with Abraham’s words to the servant in vs. 7, “he will send his angel before you.” That differs from what he just spoke, namely, that this *mal’ak* changed positions from being before the servant to being with him; in other words, over the course of their journey from Canaan to Nahor the two got better acquainted. They must have discussed in great detail what would happen—perhaps not so much that Rebekah would be involved—but the mysterious ways angels interact with humans. That would give the servant courage dealing with her family as the case now with Laban. As for this angel’s purpose in accompanying the servant, it is to “prosper your way,” the verb being *tsalach* as in vs. 21, again with respect to *derek* or way. Next the

servant laid out the conditions of his oath, that he would be free from it if the future bride would not consent to let their daughter go with him after which he describes in some detail his encounter by the spring with Rebekah. Surely Rebekah herself must have been listening in secretly. Even better, Laban could have planted her within listening range to see if the servant's story corroborated with her side which continues in rather lengthy fashion from vs. 42 through vs. 49. The servant adds, however, that he prefers to turn "to the right hand or to the left" [vs.49] should the Lord decide not to "deal loyally and truly" with him. Again the word *chesed* is used for "loyally" with its connotations of steadfast love; *'emeth* is the noun for "faith" as translating the adverb "truly."

"The thing comes from the Lord; we cannot speak to you bad or good" [vs. 50]. Such is the response to the servant's story by both Laban and Bethuel. *Davar* is the word for "thing" which fits in with the words the servant's had spoken; attributing *davar* to the Lord implies it was a word from him and encompassed a reality larger than the account just given. Since this is a divine *davar*, it is immune from both the human attribution of good and evil...in other words, incontestable. Right away the two men agree to allow Rebekah leave with Abraham's servant "as the Lord has spoken," the verb being *davar*. At this point Rebekah maintains silence, being submissive to what her father and brother had wished. Then the servant "bowed himself to the earth before the Lord;" not so much to Laban and Bethuel but the Lord. By now the angel which Abraham entrusts to his servant before setting out for Nahor had departed, for his mission was complete. It was time to celebrate or not quite yet, for Rebekah needed to give her consent. To nudge her along this way, the servant "brought forth jewelry of silver and of gold and raiment" [vs. 53], all of which had been loaded onto the camels. Such wealth must have stunned everyone which the servant doled out not just to Rebekah but to her brother and mother.

A sure sign the deal had been sealed is that "he and the men who were with him ate and drank, and they spent the night there" [vs. 54]. All must have gone to bed very late because the servant met Rebekah at the well close to nightfall and later met her family after which he launched into that detailed account of his dealings with her. They found what the servant had to say completely fascinating along with information about Abraham and his exploits in Canaan, of how his son Isaac was the first to be born there and thus start a lineage that would end up possessing that country. Such a prospect thrilled both Laban and Bethuel. The servant used an indirect ploy to get Rebekah come with him right away, that is, he said "send me back to my master" [vs. 54]. That is to say, he didn't feign indifference but truly meant it. Abraham (as well as Isaac) had to know because the future of all those years in Canaan depended upon it. Better to return empty handed, for if he did, he would have several witnesses to back up his story. Even though Rebekah's family requests her to "remain with us awhile, at least ten days" [vs. 55], the servant remains adamant as evident by his response: "Do not delay me" [vs. 56]. He proceeds to repeat his reason, namely, that "the Lord has prospered [*tsalach*] my way." Besides, the angel had left him, and he must return unaided. So instead of waiting ten days the family summoned Rebekah and asked if she would go with Abraham's servant to which she replied readily "I will go" [vs. 58].

With this last hurdle completed, the family "sent away Rebekah their sister and her nurse and Abraham's servant and his men" [vs. 59]. This is the first mention of people who accompanied the servant though that had been presumed, given that a number of camels had gone along bearing very expensive gifts. Interestingly, Rebekah's nurse or *meniktah* accompanied her, this term applied to someone who nurtures a newly born infant. "Take away this child and nurse him for me" [Ex 2.9]. Taken literally that means Rebekah is an infant. However, it could apply to the woman who, despite having nursed her, remained a servant with the role of companion-maid through her youth or until she got married. At least the *meniktah* would offer support to Rebekah during their journey back to

Canaan. This woman wasn't alone accompanying Rebekah; vs. 61 says that her maidens went along. Excited at the prospect that one of their own, Abraham, had successfully got a foothold in Canaan, albeit tenuous, they rejoiced: "Our sister, be the mother of thousands...and may your descendants possess the gate of those who hate them" [vs. 60]! To possess the gates of one's enemies is a way of saying that you had breeched their walls and were about to take captive their city. In this context, however, one is reminded of Abraham bargaining with the Hittites over a suitable burial plot for his wife, Sarah. Discussions about the plot took place at the city gate (cf. 23.10) which was a form of capturing the town and hence symbolic of Israel's eventual capture of Canaan. Abraham in essence already won the victory, only it had to be carried out in stages, the first crucial one getting a bride for Isaac to propagate his race. As for the camels, Abraham's servant came with an apparently large number of them which now were used for Rebekah's escort.

"Now Isaac had come from Beer-lahai-roi and was dwelling in the Negeb" [vs. 62] (The Hebrew is a bit unclear here reading 'from coming to'). Last mention of Beer-lahai-roi was 16.14, that is, The Well of One Who Sees and Lives, named after Hagar had been rescued a second time by an angel. Just prior to the naming of the well Hagar exclaimed, "You are a God of seeing," an exclamation giving rise to the well's name. So why was Isaac drawn to Beer-lahai-roi? Obviously the name is special, after his half-brother's mother born by his own father, Abraham. His visit there must have evoked strong, even hostile, memories, knowing that his half-brother Ishmael was roaming around the desert. That's why vs. 62 says that Isaac was dwelling in the Negeb, attempting to locate Ishmael (the verb *yashav* for 'dwelling' suggests permanent residence as opposed to moving about). However, nothing is said as to whether or not the two met (presumably not). Even though the two didn't meet, Isaac's visit to Beer-lahai-roi was important, putting his role in the drama of colonizing Canaan in better perspective.

"And Isaac went out to meditate in the field in the evening" [vs. 63]. *Suach* is the verb for "meditate," the only occurrence in the Bible and seems to apply to conversing while taking a walk as is the case at hand. Isaac engages in this *suach* while walking in a field or wide open area at evening when vistas are more expansive as well as ample opportunities to enjoy the setting sun. This echoes the Lord in the garden of Eden, rather his voice, which was "walking in the garden in the cool of the day" [3.8]. The fact that Isaac didn't have his eyes raised but were cast downward intimates that he was in deep thought as to his visit to The Well of One Who Sees and Lives (Beer-lahai-roi). At the same time his attention was focused upon the mission his father had sent his trusted servant. Perhaps advanced word reached Isaac that the party was drawing near, so he anticipated its arrival by going out to the field each evening. Thus Isaac's *suach* was two-fold, enough to weigh on any young man. Finally the sound of camels braying caught Isaac's attention which made him lift his eyes. The same applied to Rebekah who knew she was drawing near to her destination and was eager to reach it before nightfall. She must have recalled her encounter with Abraham's servant at the well the same time of day.

Before Rebekah "alighted from the camel" [vs. 64], she "lifted up her eyes" in the same manner as Isaac had done. Implied here is that both were engaged in that *suach* noted in the last paragraph. More precisely, when Isaac had lifted up his eyes, Rebekah did simultaneously; thus both sets of eyes met each other directly. Eye contact made Rebekah get off her camel after which she asked Abraham's servant about the man coming to meet them. It was still light enough to recognize people, and the servant knew it was his master. So despite both Rebekah and the servant having seen Isaac in the now murky twilight, they shared the same ability to recognize each other. The servant's ability stems from the fact that he belonged to Abraham, but here he appears to belong to Isaac (or at least his share in lordship by reason of being the son). Surely Isaac retained this exceptional man long after Abraham's death though no longer do we hear from him, and that is because his chief mission had been accomplished. The first gesture by Rebekah once the servant recognized Isaac was for her to take "her



veil and cover herself” [vs. 65]. Actually by reason of their mutual *suach* the two in an instant of time had shared between each other all that they would share throughout their lives, that is, by unpacking what occurred during this *suach*. The reason for veiling herself was not modesty; she was not unlike Moses who later did the same to shield the people from the glory of the Lord which shone on his face. Rebekah didn’t want either the faithful servant nor Isaac to be overwhelmed by the power of *suach*. Just before Rebekah and Isaac went into the tent alone, the servant informed him of all “the things he had done” [vs. 66]. Probably it was a quick if not terse report because the evidence of his mission was right before him in the person of Rebekah. Chances are that Isaac bade the servant to visit his father, Abraham, in order that the two old acquaintances may share the story more leisurely.

Chapter Twenty-Four concludes with Isaac bringing Rebekah “into the tent” or in Hebrew, “Sarah his mother.” Though perhaps a scribal error, it does have sense insofar as Rebekah acted as mother to Isaac, assuring the same relationship between the two young people that had existed between Abraham and Sarah during their long years of exile. Judging by the context of these last few verses, Sarah’s death seems to have impacted Isaac much more than Abraham. After this vs. 67 says simply and poignantly, “and he loved (*’ahav*) her.” “So Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death,” *nacham* being the verb and first noted with respect to the birth of Noah: “this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the toil of our hands” [5.29].

## Chapter Twenty-Five

“Abraham took another wife whose name was Keturah.” So begins a new chapter with an almost shocking introductory verse about a man supposedly on the edge of death! Not only did these two marry, but they produced a number of children which gave birth to tribes associated with Arabia, one of which is Midian (‘But Moses fled from Pharaoh and stayed in the land of Midian,’ Ex 2.15). We don’t hear any more about Keturah but know for sure she wasn’t a native Canaanite. Perhaps Abraham decided to bring out of retirement his trusted (anonymous) servant, the one who fetched a wife for Isaac, to return to Nahor to fetch a wife for himself. Certainly Abraham must have been tempted to violate his promise to marry a Canaanite woman but did not give in. It would have been a sign of betrayal to his son Isaac as well as to the newly acquired Rebekah of Nahor. Besides, why shame himself on the verge of death? Perhaps after the generation of Isaac (i.e., the third generation) his clan might gain sufficient foothold in Canaan, thereby abolishing the prohibition against inter-marriage. History would prove otherwise, for always Abraham’s descendants would remain ambivalent about the native Canaanites among whom they lived.

“Abraham gave all he had to Isaac.” Such are the simple, direct words of vs. 5 implying that his son (Ishmael) by Hagar would receive nothing at all since he lived at the fringe of his sphere of influence. We have no details as to what Abraham handed over as inheritance though can assume from the last chapter that he was very wealthy. That is to say, to woo Rebekah Abraham sent camels laden with all sorts of gifts, just a fraction of his possessions which had accumulated through bartering with the Canaanites, let alone his native Haran. Let’s not forget Egypt where Abraham had gone. With Isaac on the verge of owning all that belonged to his father, he and Rebekah would make the foothold already obtained all the stronger. To compensate somewhat for the generosity of father to son, vs. 6 reads “But to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts.” To a certain degree this contradicts vs. 5 which, as noted, implies Ishmael. However, Abraham doesn’t want to leave any sons without gifts lest they rise up against Isaac. These gifts are more to appease sons borne to his concubines, the senior being Hagar. She had left for her native Egypt, but given the close-knit nature of society, word spread quickly that Abraham was doling out gifts. That made Hagar hasten to Canaan, feeling safe to go there now that her nemesis, Sarah, was dead. As for these sons born of Abraham’s concubines, wisely did Abraham

keep them separate from Isaac: “while he was still living he sent them away from his son Isaac, eastward to the east country” [vs., 6]. The words “while he was still living” are key because Abraham wanted to remain alive as witness that this separation would become a permanent one. Eastward seems toward what is now Jordan and Iraq, that is, away from commercial centers which have relations with Canaan. That implies Egypt plus any trading done by what is now the Mediterranean Sea. As for the sons of Abraham’s concubines, other than Ishmael and Hagar we haven’t a clue as to who there were. They could have struck an alliance with the sons who sprang from Abraham’s second wife, Keturah. Later on their alliances made life quite difficult for Israel, a constant thorn in her side.

Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people” [vs. 8] at the age of one-hundred and twenty-seven (cf. vs. 7). “Breathed his last” reads in Hebrew “breathed and died,” the verb for the former being *gavah*. “When you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust” [Ps 104.29]. Abraham had purchased a grave for Sarah (the cave of Machpelah, 23.9) with the intent it would serve as his final resting place as well. The words “was gathered to his people” are intriguing, that is, they refer to his native Haran as well as the clan that had stuck together in Canaan not intermingling with the native population. Should “his people” refer to those back in Haran, Abraham’s body may have been sent there for some time after which it was transferred to Machpelah. If Abraham’s body weren’t planted in Canaan, surely the future of his descendants would be in jeopardy. Vs. 9 give testimony that Machpelah was the spot where Abraham was laid to rest though the time gap between vs. 8 (his death) and vs. 9 (his burial) could have been much longer.

“Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the cave of Machpelah” [vs. 9]. Again, that interval between death and burial—with a detour to Haran—could have been longer than a first read of the text presents. Let’s say it was, that Abraham’s body returned for veneration to Haran after which it was borne to Machpelah, its final resting place beside Sarah. The funeral procession may have visited all the places associated with Abraham’s tentative colonization of Canaan and attracted attention of the natives. Finally the body returned with Ishmael joining in on the burial itself. This is the first time we hear of Ishmael since his circumcision in 17.26. Though both are united in showing reverence to their father, Isaac must have felt uncomfortable with his brother present...not a full brother but a bastard of sorts born of the concubine Hagar. Surely Ishmael harbored the same sentiments. Even the now elderly Hagar could have accompanied her son, glad that both Abraham and the detested Sarah were at last sealed up in a cave. Did Isaac and Ishmael discuss matters after the death of their father, probably in attempt to rekindle fond memories of their playing together as children (cf. 21.9)? Whatever happened stayed between them as it does between two brothers. However, a hint of future discord is detected after the burial, a discord which until now had been latent: “”After the death of Abraham God blessed Isaac, his son” [vs. 11]. Obviously, any blessing of Ishmael is omitted, a person who foreshadows to some degree the sluggard Esau of the following chapter. Note use of “his son” which doesn’t apply to Ishmael despite the early words of vs. 9 (‘Isaac and Ishmael his sons’). This blessing is followed by a simple statement, again in vs. 11: “And Isaac dwelt at Beer-lahai-roi” or at the Well of One who Sees and Lives. That is to say, Isaac is drawn to that place with such a mysterious name associated with his half-brother, Ishmael as had been noted above. As for this spot, Isaac had come from there to the Negeb (cf. 24.62) just before having met his future bride, Rebekah.

Vs. 12 shifts attention away from both Abraham and Sarah to the descendants of Hagar’s son, Ishmael. All in all, they comprise twelve sons, that number being symbolic of perfection as with the future twelve tribes of Israel and twelve disciples of Jesus though Ishmael’s sons had no share in such stock. As for Ishmael, he dies at the age of one-hundred and twenty-seven, well before his half brother Isaac: “he breathed his last and died and was gathered to his kindred” [vs. 17]. The verb *gavah* is used as it

was with Abraham in vs. 8 along with being gathered to his own, “people” and “kindred” being the same Hebrew word. Vs. 16 gives the names of these twelve sons of Ishmael according to “their villages and by their encampments (*tyrah*: applies to a placed fenced off as in Sg 8.9: ‘If she is a wall, we will build upon her a battlement of silver’)” saying that they are princes or *nasy*’ (singular), a term usually applied to leaders of tribes. The role of Ishmael in all this was foretold in 17.20, “He shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.” The next verse counters this election by saying that the Lord “will establish my covenant with Isaac.” This condition is of supreme importance for the future, and no one else can participate in it. As for the location of such a large amount of descendants, vs. 18 gives it as “from Havilah to Shur which is opposite Egypt in the direction of Assyria.” That is to say, south of Canaan yet too close for comfort to the ever expanding migrants from Haran when considering the long haul. This verse concludes with “he settled over against all his people” whereas the Hebrew reads literally as “he fell (*naphal*) on the face of all his brothers.” The person in mind obviously is Ishmael who seems to be embodied within his twelve sons and they in him. These words are a way of confirming 17.21 just quoted, that is, a way of saying that the divine covenant is only with Isaac and his descendants.

After Ishmael’s descendants come those of Isaac given as “Abraham’s son” [vs. 19] to distinguish him from his half brother. However, several verses intervene before talking about the birth of Jacob and Esau (they are just two brothers compared with nine of Ishmael) where mention is made of Isaac marrying Rebekah at the age of forty. Because of the delight he had in her, “Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife because she was barren” [vs. 21]. *Hatar* is the verb for “prayed” which means to burn incense and thus intimates a public, liturgical context. “So he (Moses) went out from Pharaoh and entreated the Lord” [Ex 10.18]. Perhaps Isaac had in mind the powerful intercessory capacity of his father who besought the Lord to spare Sodom and Gomorrah. He was desperate because Rebekah was *haqar* (barren), from a verbal root meaning to root or pluck out. “He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children” [Ps 113.9]. Isaac did inherit his father’s capacity of intercession because his prayer was granted. Gone were the dreaded days of Sarah’s years of not being able to bear children, days which dragged out into decades when she was in extreme old age.

“The children struggled together within her” [vs. 22]. This short sentence comes quickly on the heels of Isaac’s prayer on behalf of Rebekah as if anticipating the life-long struggle of two brothers yet to be born. *Ratsats* is the verb, very strong, and means to oppress, treat violently. “You crushed the heads of Leviathan” [Ps 74.14]. We don’t know when this *ratsats* within Rebekah’s womb began but presumably after conception, an agonizingly long period of nine months until birth. *Qerev* for “within” suggests not just the womb but the very center of Rebekah’s being which made her nine month experience all the more traumatic. No small wonder she said within the verse at hand, “If it is thus, why do I live” (NB: in most Bibles the Hebrew here is labeled as obscure)? Surely she must have had plenty of misgivings about having married Isaac, even more for having listened to Abraham’s servant. Even this servant must have had second doubts about his errand, anxiously awaiting the birth of what would be twins. As for Abraham who initiated all this in order to establish a lineage in Canaan must have been worried; were all his efforts to end in disaster? Rebekah’s tumultuous pregnancy stands in sharp contrast to the experience of Elisabeth when she greeted Mary: “For behold, when the voice of your greetings came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy” [Lk 1.44]. This meeting of Jesus and John the Baptist in the wombs of their mothers heralds a very different relationship than that between Jacob and Esau. As for Mary’s encounter with Elisabeth, it prompts her to sing the Magnificat of 1.46-56.

Vs. 23 gets to the heart of Rebekah’s dilemma: “So she went to inquire of the Lord.” The verb is *darash* last noted in 9.5 with regard to Noah’s covenant: “of every man’s brother I will require the life

of man” [9.5]. In sum, *darash* (with its fundamental meaning of rubbing, beating or treading) implies continuous mental or spiritual activity until one obtains the object sought after and has special meaning as applied to the Torah noted, for example, in Ps 119.2: “Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart.” As for Rebekah, her *darash* is preceded by her having gone to do this. What does this going (*halak*, the common verb) mean? Does she move to a certain place, perhaps the oaks of Mamre at Hebron, where Abraham first dwelt in Canaan? Whether or not Rebekah “went” there or anywhere else, *halak* suggests that in order to do a proper *darash*, she had to physically re-locate in order to be alone, away from the prying eyes of Isaac, Abraham and everyone else. She had enough company, as it were, within her...the two sons continually struggling within her womb. Chances are that during her *darash* the two fetuses quieted down sufficiently to hear the Lord who responded immediately. Getting (*halak*) from where she was to a place for *darash* was no easy matter but well worth the effort.

“Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided.” Such is the first half of vs. 23, the Lord’s response to Rebekah’s two-fold *halak* and *darash* (both, of course, were necessary; she could have one without the other). Note two different words with regard to the designation of people: nations (*goy*, singular; cf. 12.2 regarding Abraham’s promise) and the less familiar *la’am* which did not evolve into a distinction between Israel and other peoples. First noted in Rebekah’s womb are the simple presence of two *goy*—nothing is said about their struggle there which was going on already—and then that two *goy* will become two peoples which will be divided. The struggle so early between two unborn sons will undergo a separation after birth though the tension will remain. In sum, the *goy* will become *la’am*; the two struggling fetuses characterized now by the *ratsats* of vs. 22 will be changed into the division or *parad* of the first half of vs. 23.

The two nations—Jacob and Esau who are yet to be named, and to have no name in ancient society was to have no real existence—will experience more poignantly later as adults that struggle manifest at their conception, namely, *parad* or divided. *Parad* was first encountered after the flood when Noah’s three sons and their descendants spread throughout the world which shortly introduced the tower of Babel. That action, in turn, led to a pervasive *parad* or scattering—dividing—from which recovery would be next to impossible. The *parad* at hand of which the Lord is speaking with Rebekah is simply a continuation of the original dispersal of humankind from Noah to Babel to the present or at the threshold of establishing a line of descendants to inherit Canaan. The Lord drives home the personal nature of this struggle within Rebekah by the word *mehym* (‘born of you’ or bowels, womb). “My beloved put his hand to the latch and my heart (bowels) was thrilled within me” [Sg. 5.4]. By reason of being at the sum of this heritage, only Jesus Christ can resolve that division or *parad* resulting from the flood and Babel; more accurately, the descent of the Holy Spirit resolves it where people of various languages could understand what the disciples were speaking.

Vs. 23 continues with “the one shall be stronger than the elder, the elder shall serve the younger.” Here the Hebrew has the two words noted above, that is *la’am* (people) twice, with the preposition *m-* or *min* (from) inserted before the second *la’am* reading literally “nation from nation.” The verb for “be stronger” is *amats* which also refers to prevailing over or being strong. “Be strong and of good courage” [Dt 31.6]. As for the distinction between the two nations-to-be within Rebekah’s womb, one (Esau) is *rav* or great (also can apply to ‘many’) and the other (Jacob) is *tsahyr* (small in the sense of younger as used here). Both adjectives can apply to size and physical strength, a strong fetus contending with a weaker one, which is the case at hand and later will prove true once the two men become adults.

“When her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb” [vs. 24]. The



nine month period of waiting, full of anxiety and pain, has now come to an end followed by *hineh* or “behold” which indicates surprise that Rebekah has given birth to twins. She perceived this early on in her pregnancy due to their *ratsats* or struggling in the womb yet wasn’t certain of twins until they were born. “The first to exit came forth red, all his body like a hairy mantle” [vs. 25] and thus named appropriately Esau. “Red” is *’admony*, the only use of this adjective in the Bible which is related closely to *’adam* (from which the first man, Adam, was named) or earth due to its reddish hue. The baby was so hairy that it resembled a mantle or *’adereth* which means a wide garment slung over the shoulders. “Then Elijah took his mantle, rolled it up and struck the water” [2Kg 2.8]. As for the proper name Esau, it refers more to his hairiness than his red complexion. Next to follow was Jacob whose “hand had taken hold of Esau’s heel” [vs. 26]. *Hagev* is the word for “heel” and hence the proper name for Jacob, being pulled out easily, as it were, on the strength (*rav* as in vs. 23) of his brother. Prying the two brothers apart must have been a difficult task, let alone keeping them from fighting even in these early seconds of new life. All around Rebekah must have been startled and wondered what this could symbolize, especially Isaac and his father, Abraham, who were anxious for a safe delivery to set their new line of descendants (Isaac was the first of this line) on a safe track for the future. Intuitively they realized that two brothers, even if born simultaneously, would pose a problem for any matters pertaining to inheritance and hence birthright. Vs. 26 concludes with mention of Isaac’s age, sixty, which was approximately half his father’s.

“When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents” [vs. 27]. Nothing is said of the twins from their tumultuous birth until adulthood, but it can be assumed that they had to be kept apart most of the time and required what we’d call today adult supervision. Given the fact that Esau was the stronger, easily he had the upper hand when it came to physical activities, a fact which must have affected Jacob’s character early on. That suited his father Isaac just fine...a bit overbearing, perhaps, but someone strong enough to carry on the family’s heritage. To all appearances, Esau appeared destined to assume leadership with Jacob falling behind. Esau’s hairy appearance, coupled with his red complexion, might be advantageous dealing with the Canaanites insofar as it endowed him with a certain mystique, of having been set aside by God, to lead the original migrants (now mostly deceased) and their descendants. Certainly Esau was formidable looking, a natural born leader, but things were to turn out otherwise. The Hebrew for “skillful hunter” is *yodeah tsayd*, that is, knowing hunting, the verb being *yadah* which implies intimate knowledge and the noun. Given Esau’s strength, it was only natural for him to excel in this as a “man of the field.” One can’t but help recall Cain (‘a tiller of the ground’) and Abel who was a shepherd; while the latter pair didn’t slay each other, the threat remained throughout their lives, a fact not lost on them. In a way, remembrance of these distant ancestors served to maintain peace between the two brothers; after what their father Abraham had done by leaving Haran was at stake, much larger than their individual concerns.

Jacob is described as a “quiet man” or *tam* which means more precisely someone who is upright in the moral sense. “Mark the blameless man and behold the upright” [Ps 37.37]. Thus Jacob is more than a home-body, someone who shared in his grandfather’s original blessing (cf. 12.2). In addition to being *tam*, Jacob preferred living in tents as his grandfather had done since his departure from Haran. “Tents” has a two-fold significance here: primarily as opposed to Esau as a “man of the field” and secondarily as avoiding settlement in a Canaanite city and thus conforming to local customs and especially religion. Jacob took to heart Abraham’s experience in haggling with the Lord over Sodom and Gomorrah—it must have been seared into his memory—and stayed away from cities as much as possible, hence his preference for living in tents. Even if the latter isn’t plausible, by steering clear of cities Jacob carried on the tradition of being an alien in an alien country. However, that couldn’t continue for long into future generations if they were intent on conquering it as a permanent dwelling place.

Some more light is shed upon Jacob and Esau with respect to their parents: “Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob” [vs. 28]. The verb (used twice) is the common *‘ahav* but for two different reasons. Isaac was more concerned about getting food to eat, especially the game or *tsayid* which is the same term for “field” in vs. 27. Jacob receives no preference which must have aggravated all the more that natural tension between him and his brother, intensified by reason of his father preferring Esau. However, Jacob was the recipient of his mother’s affection who consoled him. Both Rebekah and Isaac were advanced in age by now, so the relationship between parents and their two offspring were operating upon a tension that had accumulated quite a few years. Now it was about to be resolved, at least as far as their inheritance was concerned, with two stories concerning the battle of Isaac’s inheritance, the first one coming at the end of this chapter and spelled out in Chapter Twenty-Seven.

As for the first story, it opens in vs. 29 with Jacob boiling pottage or *nazyd* (only five other uses are found in the Bible) which applies to boiled food in general. Esau came in from the field and was so hungry that he blurted out “Let me eat some of that red pottage, for I am famished” [vs. 30]! The next verse draws an association (already made in vs. 25) between the pottage’s color and Esau’s complexion, *‘adom* or red. Jacob comes right out with what was on his mind from the very beginning, most likely instilled by his mother and born out later by her complicity (cf. 27.5-17 in deceiving her husband, Isaac), by saying “First sell me your birthright.” The word for this *berukah* or technically, blessing (from *barak*, to bless). Nothing yet has been said of Esau’s birthright which presumably he had received from his father by reason of being the first-born...and first-born by a few second of being first to exit his mother’s womb. Esau responds with words in accord with his hairy and red appearance, formidable as it must have been, “Of what use is a birthright to me” [vs. 32]? These words are preceded by his desperate situation, of being so famished that he was about to die or as the Hebrew says literally, “going to death.”

Although Jacob knew he had his brother in a corner, he wanted to make certain the trap would spring: “Swear to me first” (the Hebrew has ‘today’ instead of ‘first’). Esau did so at once though his exact words aren’t recorded. He must have said them so quickly that Jacob barely heard or understood him. This swiftness worked in Jacob’s favor, not Esau’s, for now he felt secure enough to give his brother food. Vs. 34 sums up Esau’s mood and that of the chapter just completed, setting the stage for future tension between the two: “Thus Esau despised (*bazah*) his birthright.” If he despised it now, he must have despised it right from the beginning. After all, Esau realized he was first-born by a few seconds...and even that may have been contested by those present at the birth.

One note here at the conclusion of Chapter Twenty-Five, the halfway point of the Book of Genesis. Recall the Hebrew word *selah* which had been mentioned in the brief Introduction. Originally *selah* was intended as a liturgical pause. It can be expanded as a means of reflecting on the sacred text which, in turn, leads to resting in God’s presence. Because of its importance, *selah* was inserted at the end of each paragraph in the first five chapters of Genesis, pretty much to instill the reader with its spirit. Later in the text a reminder was added. Now at this halfway point, *selah* is introduced yet again that its spirit may continue to be part and parcel of reading the Book of Genesis as well as these notations.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

“Now there was a famine (*rahav*) in the land besides the former famine that was in the days of Abraham.” This new chapter begins with reference to 12.10 when Abraham had to make his way to

Egypt and distinguishes between the two famines which must have been fairly regular occurrences except for Egypt, the area's breadbasket. Instead of repeating his father's journey at a time when the migrants from Haran were new in Canaan and when other groups must have been making their way through Canaan to Egypt, Isaac makes a different decision. He was fully aware of how Pharaoh seduced Sarah, almost preventing her from leaving Egypt, and didn't want to repeat that. After all, Rebekah was renowned for her beauty and as a wife to one of the richest men in Canaan, albeit a foreigner. Why not take refuge closer in more familiar territory? That's why Isaac chose Gerar, the land of Abimelech, who was king of the Philistines. So if Abraham had been dead for some time, Abimelech, someone who had been both friend and adversary, was still alive and might be gracious to his son. We've heard nothing of him since his dealing with Abraham, so all must have been going well. After all, Gerar was what is now south-central Israel and not far from Hebron, presumably the place where Isaac was dwelling; nothing specific is given as to this except back in 25.9, the cave where Abraham and Sarah were buried. Despite this, we can assume that Abimelech kept close eye upon Abraham and his son Isaac as a potential threat. As for the word "Philistine," the last time it had been used (i.e., the very first time) is 21.32 although technically it refers to a descendant of Ham after the flood (cf. 10.14, 'Parthrusim, Casluhim from whom came the Philistines'). As for Isaac's decision for Gerar over Egypt, he kept in mind his father's preference for the Philistines despite tension with its king: "Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines" [21.34]. However, Isaac may have had misgivings about this because Chapter Twenty-Two begins immediately after this, the story of Abraham's offering. Chances are that Isaac harbored resentment toward his father for almost having killed him on Mount Moriah though he refrained from acting it out. As for Abimelech, we can assume that this had made a deep impression upon him as well. He was a man who had nearly lost his life as a sacrificial offering, so he must be special.

"And the Lord appeared to him and said, 'Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you'" [vs. 2]. First Isaac had decided upon Gerar, that is, on his own and possibly with extensive consultation of those veterans who had accompanied his father there many years ago. Next comes the Lord's approval in the form of an appearance (*ra'ah*: the verb to see is used) though we have no clue as to the exact nature of this seeing. The last *ra'ah* was recounted in 18.1 to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre "in the heat of the day." This was just a good a time for the Lord to manifest himself because during the hottest time of day no one else was around. If the Lord appeared, Isaac must have recognized him, not confusing this *ra'ah* with a phantom, dream or the like. Immediately after the appearance comes the Lord speaking, the two being accomplished not so much simultaneously but in tandem, not the other way around or first speaking and then seeing. The Lord seems to concur with Isaac's decision not to go down into Egypt but will "dwell in the land of which I shall tell you" [vs. 2]. And that land turned out to be the one Isaac had hit upon originally, Gerar. Note two verbs for what Isaac is to do: dwell of vs. 2 (*shakan*; to lie down) and sojourn of vs. 3 (*gur*; as Abram did in Egypt, 12.10). It should be noted that despite all the years in Canaan, Abraham was never labeled a sojourner...deliberately so because although that applied to him objectively, the real intent of his having left Haran was to lay claim to the land of Canaan. To other people you may be just another stranger in the land but haven't a clue as to Abraham's real intentions.

As for sojourning in Gerar (note the play on words, *gur*/Gerar) as his father had done, Isaac gets instructions from the Lord which are in accord with his own. It's as though the Lord saw Isaac's decision...innately a good one...and decided to give his blessing to it. To *gur* in Gerar, a part of Canaan, implies that Isaac put on temporary hold his intent of taking over Canaan. It turns out that the king of Gerar, Abimelech, will work in accord with this plan. Abimelech is the only local king both father and son had to deal with apart from those four eastern kings Abram defeated in Chapter Fourteen. That gave them confidence when confronting him. Furthermore, being a sojourner in nearby

Gerar turned out to be of greater distance spiritually than Egypt. That's why the Lord was obliged to say he would be with Isaac, will bless him and "to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands" [vs. 3], an echo of 12.7 (and a number of similar passages), "To your descendants I will give this land." While all this was transpiring Abraham was somewhere in the background, so it was natural for Isaac to consult his father as to his experience in Egypt but more importantly how to deal with Abimelech. Furthermore, the Lord adds to his promise "I will fulfil the oath which I swore to Abraham your father." *Shevuhah* is the word for oath, the last reference being 24.41 by Abraham to his servant when sending him on a mission to find a bride for Isaac. However, *shevuhah* has no direct connection with one supposedly sworn to Abraham at the beginning of Chapter Twelve which includes vs. 7 just quoted. As for "fulfil," the verb is *qum* which literally means to rise..."I will rise my oath" which implies that the Lord will inflate it within Isaac, as it were, expanding from within to without.

Vs. 4 pretty much follows in line with 15.5, the covenant the Lord made with Abram shortly after his defeat of the four eastern kings and his encounter with Melchizedek. Surely Isaac had heard his father recount it many times not so much as an old man repeating himself endlessly but of drilling into Isaac's head that he was the first of a hopefully long line of descendants destined to take over the land of Canaan. Because of this ultimate goal in mind, surely father and son consulted each other often, more so after the appearance of the Lord to Isaac. Both compared notes, as it were, as to what each had received through their respective visions (cf. 15.1 regarding Abram's). That of Abram was much more dramatic (cf. 15.9-16), understandably so, because he was the founding father chosen by the Lord. Isaac's vision was tame by comparison but essentially the same. What stands out in both is that the divine promise lays in the future and is not realized during their respective lifetimes. Now in his old age Abraham had become very familiar with these partial fulfillments, and his son seemed destined to continue in this vein. If the Lord frequently had communicated this promise to Abraham, would he be doing the same with Isaac? At this stage it seems so. Although both responded to divine visions and the like, they have assumed the pattern of familiar repetition; certainly for Abraham but not quite yet for Isaac, still relatively young, but he had his father's experience on hand which seemed destined to repeat itself. Yes, Abraham both obeyed the Lord's voice and kept his charge, commandments, statutes and laws (cf. vs. 5); apart from that, just one reliable son (the other being rebellious Esau) with little to go on from there.

Right away vs. 6 follows this rather depressing re-statement of the covenant between the Lord and Abraham with the fittingly prosaic words of "So Isaac dwelt in Gerar." What more could he do except make an agreement with King Abimelech while the famine raged in Canaan? Even the Lord's words to Isaac occurred in Gerar, one step removed from the promised land of Canaan, as it were. Isaac's silence on all this is telling. Surely he must have been on the verge of abandoning his father's original mission. At the same time, the famine was a blessing because it took Isaac's mind off his immediate problems and focused exclusively upon getting alone in Gerar as best he could. Any move would have to wait until the famine subsided in Canaan. Could it be back to Haran, the land of his father? Probably not because it was unknown to him, and the people there wouldn't recognize him, so might as will adjust as best as possible to present circumstances.

Isaac had to deal with an immediate problem, the same one which confronted his father Abraham during his temporary sojourn in Egypt (cf. 12.14-15), and that consisted in protecting his wife from the local inhabitants. He decided to call Rebekah his sister to avoid the Gerarites from first killing him and then stealing her. The reason? "She was fair to look upon" [vs. 7]. The common adjective *tov* ('good') modifies the noun *mar'eh* (sight), that is to say, Rebekah was so attractive that her beauty couldn't be concealed. This change of identity apparently was successful, for Isaac "had been there a long time" [vs. 8], the verb being *'arak* (to make long, extend) coupled with "days." For another sense, refer to Ps



129.3: “The plowers plowed upon my back; they made long their furrows.” It was only after this protracted though unspecified period of time that Abimelech had taken notice of Rebekah.

“(Abimelech) looked out of a window and saw Isaac fondling Rebekah his wife” [vs. 8]. We have no indication of where this had occurred, presumably a public area where the king and commoners associate such as a courthouse or market. Isaac and Rebekah were on the floor level in a courtyard whereas Abimelech was a story or two above perhaps waiting for some formal ceremony to get underway or casually looking down while bored by the proceedings. In other words, this gesture appears to be done casually, not by way of eavesdropping. The verb for “looked out” is *shaqaph* first noted in 18.16: “Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom.” The idea is that these men—angels—were looking down into the valley at the city much as Abimelech was looking out the window. What the king saw startled him, Isaac fondling Rebekah, the verb being *tsachaq* fundamentally meaning to laugh as Sarah had done (cf. 18.12) when overhearing the three mysterious visitors/angels speaking about her giving birth to Isaac. Furthermore, *tsachaq* is the verbal root for this proper name. So in the verse at hand, we have Isaac or *Yitschaq tsachaq* Rebekah.

Immediately Abimelech took issue with Isaac and called out to him from the courtyard above, “How then could you say ‘She is my sister’” [vs. 9]? Isaac felt put on the spot, his cover having been blown suddenly after his sojourn in Gerar (‘a long time,’ vs. 8); not only that, it was the king who was above him looking down. Isaac had no other choice but to shoot back with the words “Lest I die because of her.” Abimelech responds: if one of his subjects had lain with Rebekah “you would have brought guilt upon us” [vs. 10]. The noun for “guilt” is *asham* and connotes neglect of one’s duty in life. “But God will shatter the heads of his enemies, the hairy crown of him who walks in his guilty ways” [Ps 68.21]. Abimelech takes sides with Isaac, perhaps recalling friendship with his father, and then warns the people not to touch Rebekah, the penalty being death. Actually this was a good opportunity for such a warning. The place where both he and Isaac seems to be a large public area with multiply stories looking out into a courtyard of sorts. Plenty of people were milling about—perhaps most of Gerar’s population—so they heard their king’s decree. Those who didn’t hear it certainly got word by the end of that day. After their initial embarrassment this must have both gratified Isaac and Rebekah because the whole town knew at once that they had the king on their side.

With the protection of King Abimelech Isaac and Rebekah returned to what turns out to be their new home, that is, Gerar. They were compelled to take up residence there due to the famine in Canaan. Isaac prospers perhaps because he lacks that strong sense of exile which dominated his father, Abraham. “The Lord blessed him, and the man became rich and gained more and more until he became very wealthy” [vss. 12-13]. In other words, the Lord’s favor was upon Isaac...not just in Canaan but within a particular spot in that country, Gerar. The verb *gadal* occurs here three times with respect to getting rich and fundamentally means to become great, not simply rich in the material sense of the word. This became so noticeable that the neighboring Philistines “envied him,” the verb being *qana* which intimates a certain amount of anger. “Men in the camp were jealous of Moses and Aaron” [Ps 106.16]. A manifestation of this *qana*’s is in the next verse when the Philistines had stopped the wells Abraham had dug though there was not mention of this earlier. Nevertheless, the native inhabitants of Canaan saw that Abraham—and his son Isaac posed the same threat—was settling down long enough to provide water not just for his people but for his flocks, and flocks means pasture and pasture means considerable tracts of land to acquire. Furthermore, if you have a bunch of wells in a desert area, you control the lives of the local inhabitants. Finally Abimelech says to Isaac “Go away from us; for you are much mightier than we” [vs. 16]. *Hatsam* is the verb for “mightier” and can be applied to numerical advantage: “Were I to proclaim and tell of them, they (God’s wondrous deeds) would be more than can be numbered” [Ps 40.5]. Although Abimelech sent Isaac away—and this from an upper story in a building while looking at him below (cf. vs. 8)—all those present fell silent and made

way for Isaac to leave which he had done at their king's command. Still, there remained one more encounter with this on-again off-again king.

“So Isaac departed from there and encamped in the valley of Gerar and dwelt there” [vs. 17]. Although Isaac left the city (of Gerar), he didn't go terribly far, just to the valley by the same name. Valley implies a greater possibility of wells for water, a wise choice, but with the fear that the local Philistines were on the look-out to thwart his plans. As for the wells, Isaac restored those “which had been dug in the days of Abraham his father” [vs. 18]. Not only did he repair them but gave them the same names which his father had given them. To give a name to something is tantamount to claiming it as one's own as is the case at hand. Despite this setback, Isaac's herdsmen found water in the valley...springing water or *maym chayym*, literally “waters of life.” This set in motion a series of well-digging on Isaac's part to be described shortly. No small wonder the local herdsmen quarreled with those of Isaac: “The water is ours” [vs. 20]. Although Abraham did name the wells he had dug (but are not given here), Isaac called the well over which his herdsmen and those of Gerar quarreled Esek or *Heseq* which means Contention whose verbal root is mentioned just once here in this verse, “quarreled.”

Without further ado (possibly because the herdsmen of Gerar were stronger and had King Abimelech's support which, in turn, means military reinforcements), Isaac moves on, most likely within the same general area. After all, he could procure food in Gerar compared to Canaan even though he suffered harassment. His herdsmen dug another well, and the same thing happened. The herdsmen of Gerar didn't give up with the well of Esek and followed Isaac's retinue, taunting him all the while. This time the verb *ryv* for “quarreled” is used, not *hasaq*, which suggests a less violent confrontation, one where views were exchanged and argued over. “You have pleaded the cause of my soul” [Lam 3.58]. Instead of this well being named after the verbal root *ryv*, Isaac calls it Sitnah or Enmity, from the verbal root *satan*; it, in turn, implies an adversarial situation and is the origin for the English Satan. Yet once more Isaac “moved from there” [vs. 22], the verb being *hataq* noted in 12.8 where Abram “removed to the mountain on the east of Bethel.” Fortunately for him there was no quarrel (*ryv*), the reason not being given; he called this third well Rehoboth. As for this place, Isaac exclaims “For now the Lord has made room (Rehoboth as Broad Places or Room) for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land.” *Rachav* is the verbal root for this proper name and suggests cessation of both the *ryv* and *satan* that has plagued Isaac from the herdsmen of Gerar. “You have given me room when I was in distress” [Ps 4.1]. Once he and his entourage had settled down into the *rachav* of Rehoboth, Isaac says with confidence that he will enjoy fruitfulness, the verb being *parah* which echos God's promise to his father in 17.6, “I will make you exceedingly fruitful.” Technically this confidence applies to the valley of Gerar, Gerar itself and of course, Canaan.

“From there he went up to Beer-sheba” [vs. 23]. No reason is given for the move which seems surprising after the confidence just expressed, but it is indicative that Isaac wasn't content to stay in the valley but to spread out. This is another side of *rachav*, a broadening out; it didn't apply to the third well Isaac had dug without interference from the Gerarites which may have tempted him to stay there indefinitely. The last time we've heard of Beer-sheba was 22.19 where Abraham had dwelt after he had shown willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Perhaps Isaac wanted to go there for this personal reason, to recall that momentous event, for in that place “the Lord appeared to him the same night” [vs. 24]. Furthermore, this was the location of the well of the oath, the meaning of Beer-sheba, where Abraham had made an covenant with Isaac's nemesis, King Abimelech (cf. 21.30-32). By associating himself with that place, it might remind Abimelech of this covenant and make him well disposed. Isaac intuited that by reason of these two associations something positive would happen at Beer-sheba which it did in the form of the Lord's appearance: “I am the God of Abraham your father.” That evoked the just mentioned near sacrifice on Mount Moriah and continues pretty much in line with the earlier

promise to Abraham. The primacy of Abraham is maintained in the words “for my servant Abraham’s sake.” Isaac’s response? He didn’t reply to the Lord verbally but right away “built an altar there and called upon the name of the Lord” [vs. 25]. Nothing is said about making a sacrifice upon this altar; however, chances are it reminded him of the one on Mount Moriah. Not only does Isaac built this altar but calls upon the Lord’s name or as the Hebrew has it literally, “in the name.” This calling (*qara*’) differs from the recent communication when the Lord appeared to him and has more a liturgical air to it in which other members of Isaac’s retinue may participate. In order to be close to this sacred spot, Isaac “pitched his tent there” followed by his servants digging yet another well. This well gives the camp a sense of stability, that Isaac would remain in Beer-sheba indefinitely or at least until the famine in Canaan subsides.

When Isaac first entered the valley of Gerar he was pursued relentlessly by local herdsmen who prevented him from settling down. Now that he decided upon Beer-sheba, King Abimelech decided to pay him a visit along with his adviser and Phicol, commander of his army, an incident reminiscent of 21.22 when they (minus the adviser) met Abraham over a dispute concerning a well of water “which Abimelech’s servants had seized” [21.25]. It was a tense situation, Phicol representing the potential of military action, yet was resolved peacefully. They swore an oath at Beer-sheba, the same place where Isaac met the king and his commander, for it was here that Abraham had a similar confrontation and called the spot Well of Seven or Well of the Oath (cf. 21.31). Isaac expressed surprise tinged with some anger when he met the king and his two top officials: “Why have you come to me, seeing that you hate me” [vs. 27]? The last time Isaac had met Abimelech was in that courtyard when he and Rebekah were fondling each other (cf. vs. 8); that had caused Isaac considerable embarrassment, forcing him to leave for the valley of Gerar. To the king’s credit, he did not threaten Isaac but actually sought to protect him: “Whoever touches this man or his wife shall be put to death” [vs. 11]. It seems that Isaac was more angry at the herdsmen who harassed him while digging several wells and attributed this to Abimelech trying to get at him.

Isaac had the wrong impression about Abimelech, understandable in the presence of his chief adviser and military commander whose anger quickly turned to embarrassment by their disarming words: “We see plainly that the Lord is with you” [vs. 28]. “Plainly” is expressed in Hebrew by a repetition of the verb *ra’ah* (to see) which is *ra’u ra’ynu*. It is as though their second seeing confirmed their first one, the object being that the Lord is with Jacob. When did they recognize that? Was it before Abimelech had looked down upon Isaac? The answer goes all the way back to when Abraham sojourned in Gerar. Abimelech stole away Abraham’s wife, Sarah, and the Lord appeared in a dream warning that as a result, he is “a dead man” [20.3]. To his credit, Abimelech obeyed and returned Sarah to Abraham, now knowing that he was gifted, despite someone with possible subversive motives. Thrown into this mix is the place of Beer-sheba both as it relates to Abraham and Isaac within which is a conflict over a whole series of wells.

By no means was Abimelech powerless. He could have crushed either Abraham or Isaac at any moment but realized something beyond his control was transpiring, that eventually his native land would be handed over to these migrant from Haran. And so he proposes a covenant (*beryth*) which is quite unusual insofar as it is the first one made between two men compared with between God and man. Abimelech must have heard of the various times the Lord spoke about a *beryth* with Abraham and now Isaac; if somehow he could replicate this pact, a deal might be worked out in his favor. The object of this covenant: “that you will do us no harm just as we have not touched you” [vs. 29]. *Rahah* is the word for “harm” which generally applies to evil. In other words, if neither party does *raha*, all will be fine. Abimelech gives his approval of this covenant by saying “You are now the blessed of the Lord” [vs. 29]. So the more we hear about Abimelech, the more impressive he is. While true, there’s

the unanswered question of what his people thought about him, for he had made a number of concessions to migrants whose intent on their land was well known by now. The only restraint from wiping them out was their relatively small number. Actually the covenant seems to be made early the next day when “they took oath with one another” [vs. 31]. *Shavah* is the verb here which forms part of the proper name Beer-sheba; hence the hidden yet important role this place has played from the very beginning of Abimelech’s contact with Abraham and now his son. Almost as if to top off this covenant Isaac’s servants dug a well and found water, hence he called the place Shibah which is closely related to the proper name Beer-sheba. At last a well could be dug and used without interference from any of the locals.

Chapter Twenty-Six concludes on a sour personal note for Isaac, one he must have regretted in latter years. At the age of forty Isaac took two wives, Judith and Basemath, both of Hittite origin, that is to say, these two women were natives of the area. His gesture goes against Abraham’s prohibition of not taking a wife “from the daughters of the Canaanites” [24.3] which would lead not so much to inter-marriage but to worship of their gods. That’s why Abraham sent his trusted servant back to the city of Nahor to fetch a wife for Isaac, a mission that had succeeded. Perhaps Isaac felt he owed King Abimelech something for his generosity and gave into violating his father’s wish. As for Judith and Basemath, the only fact we know about them is summed up in the concluding words of this chapter, “and they made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah” [vs. 35]. *Morah* is a noun for “bitter,” the only one in the Bible, which derives from the verbal root *marah*, to be rebellious. “A stubborn and rebellious generation” [Ps 78.8]. Note that both Isaac and his wife experienced this *morah*; though details aren’t given, most likely it pertains to worship of their gods, a fact compounded by having to deal with their families, natives of the area and people with whom Isaac should not associate. Rebekah especially must have felt *morah*; she had to contend with two foreign wives and experienced mightily the same abuse as Sarai did with Hagar. To her credit, however, she didn’t banish Judith and Basemath but put up with them for the rest of her life. This simmering resentment may have had something to do with Rebekah’s plot with her favored son Jacob shortly to be described in some detail. As for the two Hittite wives, it wouldn’t be surprising that they took the side of Esau whose life style was more in line with theirs though nothing of this is recorded.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

“When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so he could not see, he called Esau his older son.” Apparently considerable time had passed between the conclusion of the last chapter and now which had been taken up by Isaac’s contention with his Hittite wives, Judith and Basemath. So in a sense, the bulk of Isaac’s life was tragic, all his accomplishments having taken place before the age of forty. It isn’t a fact appreciated, but many years lay ahead when Isaac continued to be bed-ridden after Jacob had cheated Esau out of his birthright as first-born son. Isaac did his best to continue the mission of his father Abraham to provide heirs for taking over Canaan and largely succeeded. However, his preference for Esau as recounted in this chapter makes him less than desirable than his father and his son Jacob whose story lay ahead. Isaac is an in-between person...in-between the original settlers from Haran and the new generation represented by Jacob which had no first hand knowledge of that place but considered Canaan their native land. Esau as Isaac’s first-born took after his father’s character with the exception of being devoted to the Lord. It was obvious for one who had roamed around the valley of Gerar, digging so many wells and struggling with local herdsmen, to prefer a son just as vigorous as he. Surely Esau had learned from his father’s conflicts with the Gerarites and helped him deal with them, for he was not entirely unlike them (‘a skilled hunter, a man of the field,’ 25.27).

Although Isaac was old, he did not know the day of his death but felt it was approaching (cf. vs. 2; but



as noted above, it was further away than Isaac could have dreamed). It was only natural, then, that he summon his first-born to prepare him for his rightful blessing and heritage. Isaac bade Esau to go out hunting and “prepare for me savory food such as I love” [vs. 4]. *Matham* is the word for “savory food,” the verbal root being *taham*, to taste (i.e., it or the game could read ‘tasty food’). Just the fact that Isaac loved (‘*ahav*) this food taken from the wild reveals his similarity and natural affinity to Esau. It’s easy to imagine the two in earlier, happy days going off hunting together while Jacob and Rebekah stayed at home pretty much resenting this close bond. The reason Isaac bade Esau to hurry on his to procure food was that “I may bless you before I die” [vs. 4]. No mention is made of Jacob, just the elder brother, which speaks volumes of the younger brother’s second-rate status in the eyes of his father. Abraham would have been mortified, really, because Esau took to the field and blended in with the local Canaanites with whom he was forbidden to associate. Isaac would have shared in the same disgust, but given his weakness for “savory food” and being confined to bed, he wasn’t fully aware of Esau’s activity. Furthermore, Isaac resented the attempt on his life on Mount Moriah, so it was only natural that he prefer the people—and therefore the gods—of the local population compared to his father’s God who demanded sacrifice of his son.

“Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau” [vs. 5]. She wasn’t right at her husband’s bedside but close enough and like Sarah, stealthily “listening at the tent door behind him” [18.10]. Rebekah absorbed every word between father and son, especially alarmed at Isaac’s desire to bless his first-born son whom she apparently despised. She had an inkling this was inevitable and was waiting for the chance to intervene without being detected. As soon as Esau headed into the field Rebekah ran to Jacob, her favorite, and informed him. We don’t have any response except compliance to his mother’s demands to deprive Esau of his birthright. “Now therefore, my son, obey my word as I command you” [vs. 8]. These are rather forceful words coming from a mother made of sterner stuff than Isaac. After all, Rebekah consented to leave her native Nahor (cf. 24.10) and follow an unknown servant of Abraham back to Canaan in order to marry of whom she hadn’t the slightest knowledge. As for the verb “obey,” it’s *shamah* (to listen to), and *qol* (voice) is the noun for “word.” Isaac was on what amounted to his deathbed when he bade Esau to go hunting which means that Rebekah was about the same age and therefore in not much better condition. She appreciated what was really at stake, the future of Abraham’s mission, and didn’t want it squandered over “savory food” [vs. 4].

The strategy? Rebekah told her son to get from the flock “two good kids that (she) may prepare from them savory food for your father such as he loves” [vs. 9]. Rebekah is thoroughly familiar with her husband’s taste and has Jacob prepare the same savory (*matham*) dish as Esau had intended. Goats are domestic animals, and the animals Esau was out hunting were wild. Rebekah was familiar enough with her elder son’s hunting habits so figured she could doctor a goat to taste pretty much the same as what he’d bring in. She had to be careful...though Isaac was advanced in age, his sense of taste was the strongest of the all and hadn’t diminished which often is the case with elderly people. Once Rebekah reveals the full extent of her plan, Jacob more or less complies yet offers the reasonable objection: “Behold, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man” [vs. 11]. The contrast between the two brothers is striking which had been noticed at their birth (cf. 25.25-6), though nothing is said of Jacob’s physical appearance compared to Esau “like a hairy mantle.” In the verse at hand, the contrast is presented as hairy vs. smooth or *sahor* and *chalaq*; the latter has four other biblical references, one of which is Prov 5.3: “and her mouth is smoother than oil.” Judging by this verse, the basic idea of *chalaq* (from the verbal root to divide) is that of deception and deceit and applied to Jacob, is less than flattering. More accurately, Jacob seems a straight-forward sort of fellow with the adjective *chalaq* more applicable to his mother, Rebekah.

Jackob’s uprightness is evident by his response: “Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be

mocking him and bring a curse upon myself and not a blessing” [vs. 12]. The verb *mashash* is more suggestive of groping as a blind man or as one would get around in the dark. One vivid example is Ex 10.21: “A darkness which may be felt.” The second verb is *tahah* (to mock) which has one other biblical reference: “but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord rose against his people” [2Chron 36.16]. Jacob expressed a similar fear with regard to what his mother proposed and did not wish to consent. The risk of incurring a curse (*qelalah*), not a blessing, was considerable. What made the situation more tricky was not just simply pulling the wool over his father’s eyes but impersonating himself as the first-born, very important where the future lineage begun by Abraham in Canaan was at stake. Rebekah attempted to reassure her favorite son with “Upon me be your curse, my son; only obey my word and go fetch them to me” [vs. 13]. This transferal of a curse swayed Jacob, albeit reluctantly. All the while Esau was out in the field hunting game with thoughts of the blessing he was about to receive. Jacob had him in mind and knew that if this trick were pulled off successfully, his brother would seek revenge. After all, Esau was an experienced hunter and easily could track down Jacob. Once Jacob brought his mother kids from the flock compared with the wild game Esau was about to bring home, she prepared it herself. The next step was to get Esau’s “best garments” [vs. 15], *bagad* being a general term. Such garments were the “best,” an adjective derived from a verbal root meaning to desire, *chamad*. Given Esau’s rough temperament and love of the outdoors, seldom he wore these garments except to cover up his red hairiness when in more public or formal circumstances. Jacob must have felt a bit awkward wearing his brother’s best clothing, something he never had done. That’s why his mother clothed him which must have made him feel embarrassed. Once so decked out, Rebekah put the “skins of the kids upon his hands and upon the smooth part of his neck” [vs. 16]. The color of these skins didn’t matter (Esau was red in complexion) because of Isaac’s blindness. She knew where Isaac would feel his son as he reached up and held him for the blessing. Only one more step was required, and that was to put into the hand of Jacob the “savory food and the bread” [vs. 17]. This must have been fairly awkward because Jacob’s hand was covered with the goat skin. All he had to do was walk in and try as best he can to cheat both his father and elder brother under the watchful eye of his mother, a daunting challenge, given Jacob’s temperament.

Rebekah now passes off the scene, rather, slips into the background as in vs. 5. Though the text doesn’t say so, chances are she was close by coaching her son because Isaac was blind. Even if she made some noise, her husband was used to her milling about along with servants and the like. All this takes place in what must be a tent compared to a permanent dwelling. Right away Isaac correctly distinguished between Jacob’s words “my father” and the person behind them because he said, “who are you, my son” [vs. 18]? At the same time he calls this person “son” just in case. Rebekah must have been mortified, afraid that her scheme was about to unravel before her eyes. Jacob glanced over at her and received encouragement to continue with “I am Esau your first-born.” He has Esau’s direct manner down well, for Jacob asked his father to sit up, eat and then impart his blessing. Despite his age and blindness, Isaac showed himself more formidable than perhaps both Rebekah and Jacob had thought: “How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son” [vs. 20]? To this Jacob answered with tongue-in-cheek, “Because the Lord your God granted me success” [vs. 20]. A phrase is used for verb, *qarah liphney*, that is, a verb which means to happen or befall with the preposition “before;” the literal translation would read “call before my face.” The idea is that the Lord (i.e., ‘your’ God, not necessarily mine which can imply a dig at the Lord who spared Isaac from being sacrificed on Mount Moriah in a nick of time) calls one before him which in and by itself is a success, more than one could ask for.

As just noted, Isaac had an inherent mistrust of this person before him claiming to be Esau and wants physical confirmation. It’s easy to picture Rebekah tip-toeing up to Isaac in bed and extending her son’s reluctant arm for him to feel (*mashash*, as in vs. 12). This wouldn’t be a mere touch but as the

verb suggests, a genuine groping and feeling about in order to determine if the arm did belong to Esau as the voice claimed to be. After a time which to Jacob and his mother must have seemed an eternity, Isaac says “The voice is Jacob’s voice but the hands are the hands of Esau” [vs. 22]. So the aged Isaac experienced a conflict between two senses, hearing and touching. “And he (Isaac) did not recognize him because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau’s hands” [vs. 23]. Thus the sense of hearing won out over that of touch but even that wasn’t absolute confirmation of Isaac. *Nakar* is the verb for “recognize” which also means to alienate, estrange as well as to acknowledge. “Thus Joseph knew his brothers, but they did not know him” [42.48]. So with two senses in conflict as to make a proper discernment, Isaac decides to test this mysterious person with a third sense, the one of taste: “Bring it to me that I may eat of my son’s game and bless you” [vs. 25]. Even though there might exist one recipe for a given type of food, each person prepares it differently. Isaac was used to Esau’s recipe, so now the taste-test would be the final deciding factor. Both Rebekah and Jacob were on to this which is why “he brought him wine, and he drank” [vs.25]. Wine would dull Isaac’s sense of taste, and it worked: “Come near and kiss me, my son” [v. 26]. Not only did the ruse succeed but the smell of Esau’s garments confirmed what Rebekah had contrived with her half-willing son. The scent was that of game and the field which reveals that when Esau returned from hunting, he didn’t bother to tidy up but slipped immediately into “best garments” [vs. 15].

“See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the Lord has blessed” [vs. 27]! Here we have a blessing which runs through vs. 29, one intended for Esau but in actuality given to Jacob. A verb of seeing (*ra’ah*) is used to introduced the sense of smell, a bit stronger than the previously mentioned *hineh* or behold. *Ra’ah* is a communal exhortation for others to share in the same experience, namely, the scent of Esau. The noun for that word is *reyach*, closely related to *ruach* or wind, spirit. Isaac picked up this scent not so much from whom he thought was Esau but from his clothes, the scent of which was one step removed as coming from Esau himself. Regardless, Isaac blesses Jacob without hesitation, so taken aback was he by this scent which reminded him of many precious experiences of the past. While taking in the scent of Esau’s clothes, Isaac’s thoughts must have hearkened back to the valley of Gerar where he has wandered while being hounded by the local inhabitants. So when Isaac says “a field which the Lord has blessed,” he means one with a well he can call his own, not one taken over by invading herdsmen. Furthermore, there seems to be a close connection between the immediate blessing bestowed upon the apparent Esau and that of the field. If the Lord has blessed one, surely the other is in order, both being connected by the sense of smell.

“May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine.” So runs vs.2 which expands upon the smell or *reyach* of the field, an image so dear to both Isaac and his first-born son but not his second born to whom he speaking with right now. The dew (*tal*) is very light rain or moisture descending from the sky which adds to the scent, deep and earthy. It, in turn, gives rise to the “fatness of the earth,” the term being *shemen* which signifies not just produce from the ground but an abundance of it. Another meaning is oil as in Ps 23.5: “You have anointed my head with oil.” So if oil is involved, that means it can be scented...scented like the rich earthy scent arising from the ground. As for the wine at hand, more specifically *tyrosh* refers to new wine: “and your presses shall burst out with new wine” [Prov 3.10].

Vs. 29 gets down to the essence of the blessing, namely, subjection of people (the local Canaanites) and a curse upon those whom curse the first-born. As for the first part, the Hebrew has for “peoples and nations” the general term *ham* over whom Esau is supposed to have lordship. A similar relationship is to be shown toward “your brothers,” the plural being used though we have no mention of any brothers except Esau and Jacob. The same plurality is found a bit later as “your mother’s sons.” As for them, they are to be like the *ham* (‘peoples and nations’) insofar as they are to bow down or *shachah*, the last

use of this verb being 22.5 under its alternate meaning of worship. The noun for “lord” is *gevyr*, the only other reference being vs. 37.1, a term implying more strength and the ability to prevail (*gavar* is the verbal root), quite in line with Esau’s character. As for the blessing, that which Isaac is transmitting to his presumed first-born will, in turn, be extended to others who come in contact with him.

One can only imagine what was going through Jacob’s mind as he stood so close to his father. The same applies to the real perpetrator, Rebekah, who was close by as well and exchanging silent stares of anxiety with her favorite son. At last the blessing had been imparted, just in time, for Esau “came in from his hunting” [vs. 30]. The verse says that Jacob left his father; it would be more accurate to say that Jacob left his mother as well. As soon Esau returned, he set about to prepare “savory food” for his father; apparently he didn’t visit Isaac, for he was set more upon attaining the blessing which already had been bestowed upon his brother. Esau must have prepared this food or *matham* with great care and with no help from his mother. He had no thought of her, let alone his brother, so went into his father’s presence blithely unaware of what had just transpired. Isaac said “Who are you?” [vs. 32], pretty much the same he had said to Jacob earlier (cf. vs. 18) though did not add “my son.” Straightaway Esau identified himself, words which made Isaac “tremble violently” [vs. 33], the verb being *charad* used twice with the adverb *me’od* usually meaning that which is excessive. “And the elders of the town trembled” [1Sam 16.4]. In other words, *charad* reveals that Isaac was shaken to his very being.

Despite this unnerving experience upon Isaac’s deathbed, he asks about the identity of the person to whom he had just given his blessing, that of a father to presumably his first-born. His question is tinged with some panic yet quickly regains his composure and says “yes, he shall be blessed” [vs. 33]. The word “yes” is *gan* also rendered “also.” That put Esau over the edge, standing there with his father’s favorite food in hand. “He cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry” [vs. 34] perhaps throwing the food on the floor in disgust. The verb *tsahaq* and the noun *tsehaqah* derived from it is used to dramatize Esau’s plight, this verbal root applicable to a cry for help. “I cry aloud to God, aloud to God that he may hear me” [Ps 72.1]. To make the situation even more striking, the adverb *me’od* is used, “excessively.” The cry wasn’t to God but took the form of “Bless me, even me also, O my father” [vs. 34]! Esau realized instantly that his blessing had been forfeited, the most obvious suspect being his brother, Jacob. Although the text says that Isaac had no idea who the mysterious person was, now he claims it was Jacob: “Your brother came with guile, and he has taken away your blessing” [vs. 35]. Perhaps by now Rebekah had informed her husband, Jacob himself or even a nosey servant though we have no account of it. *Mirmah* is the noun for guile, alternately as deceit. This trait is revealed later on with the seduction of Dinah by the sons of Jacob who “answered Shechem and his father Hamor deceitfully because he had defiled their sister Dinah” [34.13].

Esau recalls the meaning of his brother’s name and blurts it out: “Is he not rightly named Jacob” [vs. 36]? This hearkens back to the birth of the two brothers, actually twins: “and his hand had taken hold of Esau’s heel; so his name was called Jacob” [25.26]. Though both were scarcely born, this memory had been seared into both brothers, especially the elder (by only a minute or two); it was told and re-told countless times while they were growing up and reached climax with the event at hand. *Haqev* is the word for “heel” mentioned at the twin’s birth from which is derived Jacob’s name as deceiver. *Haqav* is the verb used here, and has just four other biblical references one of which is Jer 9.4: “for every brother is a supplanter and every neighbor goes about as a slanderer.” To be associated with deceit from earliest childhood is just as bad, if not worse, than first-born Esau having been relegated to second place. After publically lamenting this trick, Esau asks his father “Have you not reserved a blessing for me” [vs. 36]? The verb is *atsal* which basically means to join, connect. One of the four other biblical references is Num 11.17: “and I will take some of the spirit which is upon you and put it upon them.” In other words, the idea seems to be not unlike grafting, and applied to Esau, it’s as



though he wishes to be grafted back onto the blessing proper to the status of first-born. With this in mind, we can understand Isaac's response: "Behold, I have made him your lord" [vs. 37]. *Gevyr* is the noun for "lord" which was noted in vs. 29, part of the blessing Isaac imparted to Jacob: "Be lord over your brothers." In this verse Isaac refers to "all his brothers" whereas the text deals only with Jacob and Esau. So if other brothers existed, we have no record of what they had thought of all this and how they interacted with the twins. Regardless, the future for Esau looked dim. Jacob, who struggled with him at birth, is destined to lord it over him for the rest of his life. Now Isaac throws a curve ball: "What can I do for you, my son" [vs. 37]? This must have outraged Esau though he kept his anger subdued. With some irony he replied with the question "Have you but one blessing, my father" [vs. 38]? Esau then "lifted up his voice and wept," the verb for the latter being *bakah*, similar in sound to the verbal root for blessing, *barak*. This ties in with Esau having wept because of the lost blessing...*bakah* for the *barak*.

The next two verses (39-40) are Isaac's response to Esau's desire for a blessing, not a good omen, which compounds the birthright already forfeited and echos the Lord's words to Adam when he banished him from the garden of Eden. "Behold, away from the fatness of the earth shall your dwelling be and away from the dew of heaven on high" [vs. 39]. *Shemen* is the word for "fatness" as used in vs. 28, the blessing to Jacob. To be "from" this is particularly hard for Esau who was "a skillful hunter, a man of the field" 25.27]. The same applied to the dew (*tal*) of heaven," similarly noted in the blessing of Jacob, *tal* being light, almost imperceptible moisture which over time gives the earth a deep, rich scent. In addition to this separation from what Esau loved dearly—and Isaac was aware of it fully, having loved Esau more than Jacob—we have "By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother" [vs. 40]. Living by the sword wasn't the worst fate for Esau who loved being out in the field, but serving his brother was another thing. Actually this sentence is a paradox: sword and serving. The two just don't mix, and Esau knows it. The best part of Isaac's words come last: "but when you break loose you shall break his yoke from your neck." That is to say, the service (the verb *havad* suggests being a slave) having its roots at the twin's very birth will not last long, and Esau will be free of his brother's grasp at his heel. Most likely that freedom applies later to King David when Edom, which had been subjected to him, broke free under King Solomon. However, there is no immediate fulfillment of it in either one of the brother's lives since they both separate at this point.

The words of vs. 41 come as no surprise: "Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him." *Satam* is the verb for "hated" and suggests the laying of snares...in other words, a hatred which is put off for the future. "The archers fiercely attacked him, shot at him, and harassed him sorely" [49.23]. This simmering desire for revenge is borne out by the words "and Esau said to himself" or "said in his heart." Reference is to slaying Jacob once the days of mourning for the anticipated death of Isaac have past. Esau may have wished the same fate for his father, but he passes off the scene despite lingering on for some time or until he died at the age of a hundred and eighty years (cf. 35.28-29). Because Esau was a person who talked and acted freely, he must have gone about telling people of his murderous plans. Finally word reached Rebekah who, in turn, informs Jacob: "Behold, your brother Esau comforts himself by planning to kill you" [vs. 42]. An understatement, to be sure, for they and others knew Esau's temperament, fiery as the red hair on his body which gave him his name. The verb *nacham* (comforts; last noted in 24.67) is revealing in that the murderous plan of Esau offers relief from having been deprived of his blessing and the curse of vss. 39-40. The picture of Esau walking around the household with this *nacham* lurking in his heart unsettled everyone which is why the two brothers couldn't stay together from this point onward. Actually, never were they close, so why not make manifest what had been latent for so long?

Rebekah now comes up with the idea of sending Jacob away: "Arise, flee to Laban my brother in

Haran” [vs. 43]. A radical suggestion, to be sure, because Jacob was to forsake Canaan, the land in which his grandfather Abraham had dwelt under tenuous circumstances. To leave Canaan and return to Haran from which Abraham was summoned was to abandon all that his family had struggled for, putting in jeopardy the entire divine enterprise. At least Laban, Rebekah’s brother, would be a base from which Jacob eventually would return. Actually she bids Jacob not to return permanently but “to stay a while, until your brother’s fury turns away” [vs. 44]. Rebekah seems confident that this will happen, given Esau’s mercurial temperament common to a man who is fond of hunting as opposed to remaining close to home. She had a point: “Why should I be bereft of you both in one day” [vs. 45]?

Finally Rebekah turns to her husband and utters the complaint: “I am weary of my life because of the Hittite women” [vs. 46]. She may have been thinking of Esau who married two Hittite women, Judith and Basemath (cf. 26.34). That was an indirect reminder to Isaac of Esau’s betrayal to intermarry, something forbidden by Abraham. Intermarriage was one thing, but the strong possibility that Hittite women to make Esau and other migrants from Haran worship native gods was more dangerous. When Rebekah’s complaint is an introduction of sorts for the next chapter, for instead of summoning Esau, Isaac calls Jacob and enjoins him not to marry a Canaanite woman.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

With Rebekah’s words about the Hittite women still echoing in her husband Isaac’s ears, the scene shifts to the departure of Jacob in order that he may procure a bride. As noted earlier, more than marrying a native-born woman of Canaan is at stake...it is a matter of keeping worship of the one true God pure as possible. To intermarry meant the blending of the one God with the multiple gods of Canaan, strictly forbidden. As for Haran from where Abraham had originated, worship of God seemed to have remained untainted from the days after the flood and through the construction of the tower of Babel. Despite this wonderful tradition, God bade Abram to leave for Canaan, something that must have been difficult for him to accept. As for the departure of Jacob which opens this chapter, it happened at a fortuitous moment because Esau was out for revenge: the further away Jacob went, the safer he was. Though we get no direct response from Isaac concerning Rebekah’s lament, it must have registered, for he called Jacob for a second blessing. This was followed by an order: “You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women.” Actually Esau already had done this (Judith and Basemath), and Isaac seems to have had no grudge toward him, even to the point of not refusing the blessing of first-born son about which Jacob had outwitted him. Jacob was ordered to go Paddan-aram (first mentioned in 25.20), “to the house of Bethuel your mother’s father and take as wife from there one of the daughters of Laban your mother’s brother” [vs. 2]. In other words, Jacob was about to head for the same city and family from which his mother Rebekah had originated, the one to which the faithful yet anonymous servant of Abraham had gone for Rebekah. If he had such luck there, why not a second time? Surely this servant, if he were alive and by Isaac’s bedside, would have concurred with the decision of his master’s son and even offer wise counsel as what to do upon arrival.

As for Isaac’s blessing, it ran the now familiar tone of God Almighty (here rendered as El Shaddai) imparting it but with a different twist here, to make Jacob “a company of peoples” [vs. 3]. *Qahal* is the noun for “company”—the first time used in the Bible—applies to a congregation or assembly gathered for the worship of God. As had been the case with Isaac, the lineage begun in Canaan by Abraham is brought a decisive step further. Esau never could have effected this; he was too attached to his hunting and the land of Canaan to which he fit in as a native son. That’s why Isaac continues his blessing by mentioning Abraham in vs. 4, having in mind the ultimate aim of taking “possession of the land of your sojournings.” *Magor* is the noun for “sojournings” noted in 17.8 with respect to the then-named Abram, and to take possession of it means putting an end to the nagging, insecure feeling of being an

immigrant. At some time there has to come to a halt this constant perception of being a stranger in a strange land that had begun with Abraham and included the wearisome task of returning to such places as Paddan-aran to fetch a wife. Once that stopped, Abraham's seed would cease being foreign and become natives. It was a question of when and how to do this, something that never had been resolved.

The trip to Paddan-aran was uneventful, for vs. 5 simply says that Jacob went there. They must have been curious about Esau; after all, Laban was his uncle and may have expected him instead as the first-born. The fact that Jacob showed up instead intimated that something had happened between the two brothers. At this point either Laban or someone of his household may have contacted Isaac to obtain an objective picture. Certainly Jacob wasn't going to let them in on how their daughter Rebekah had played such a decisive part in deceiving her husband.

Action now shifts from Jacob's arrival among Rebekah's relatives back to Esau who "saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him away to Paddan-aran to take a wife from there" [vs. 6]. This seeing reveals a certain distance that had developed between him and his father, including his mother whom he must have come to despise but couldn't manifest it. He thought Jacob a coward to return to his mother's family and wondered why she didn't accompany him. Surely Rebekah must have felt her life was threatened and kept a close eye on her son. The real rub was that Jacob "had obeyed his father and his mother" [vs. 7], something Esau never was capable of doing. So from this point onward Esau was a stranger within his own household. At least his love for the field and hunting kept him pre-occupied and relatively safe where he could blow off steam. Esau reveals his rebellious nature by going to Ishmael, the son of Abraham by Hagar, for a wife. The last time Ishmael was mentioned was his death in 25.17, so Esau had in mind his descendants. The two never knew each other but would have been intimates, given their rebellious natures, a trait that must have extended to Ishmael's clan. From there Esau took as a wife Mahalath, Ishmael's daughter, who must have borne striking resemblance to her mother, Hagar the Egyptian. In other words, Esau took this step in defiance of his father's prohibition as well as his brother who complied, the reason for him having received further blessings. Esau knew he was out of the loop and never could recover what he had forfeited. It must have been painful for him to live out the rest of his days. However, his later reconciliation with Jacob in Chapter Thirty-Three shows that he retained some humanity; not only that, Esau had prospered and showed no ill-will.

"Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran" [vs. 10], that is, toward the ancestral land of Abraham, and did so under cover of darkness to avoid Esau. Apparently he made this journey on his own since no other person is named. The closer Jacob drew to Haran, the further away he was from Esau who, though a lover of hunting and expert at tracking, maintained certain boundary between his favorite areas and those of other peoples. Even though Esau easily could have overtaken Jacob, he ran the risk of getting into serious trouble with those people outside his favorite hunting grounds. "And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night because the sun had set" [vs. 11]. The place (*maqom*: usually applied to an inhabited area) is unspecified though revealed later as Luz which Jacob changed to Bethel (vs. 19). Thus between the arrival of Jacob at this *maqom* and when he calls it Bethel, it is named Luz though he didn't know it at the time. The verb *pagah* for "came" connotes a striking or rushing, usually in sudden fashion. "Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him" [32.1]. That is, the angels came upon Jacob unawares. As for the case at hand, sunset overtook—it *pagah* or struck Jacob—so he had no choice but to camp for the night. During the day Jacob had been intent on putting as much distance between him and Esau as humanly possible, so intent that he lost all sense of the passage of time. Thus when night *pagah* him, he was quite unaware that it had happened and had no option except to settle down. Vs. 11 continues with Jacob taking a stone for a pillow of sorts after which he fell fast asleep. He was so tired from fleeing Esau that barely he had time to make himself comfortable for the night. That was irrelevant in light of what the next verse has to say.

“And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven” [vs. 12]. *Sulam* is the noun for “ladder,” the only use of this term in the Bible; it is derived from the verbal root *salal*, to lift up. Note the passive use of the verb, “was set up” (*natsav*, to set in place)...by whom is not given; it just appears as such. This ladder was exceptionally long, for it reached from earth to heaven, that is, it touched heaven (*nagah*) thereby uniting it with the earth (*'erets*; usually refers to earth as a place to inhabit). Once Jacob perceived this ladder, “behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.” A ladder allows for one-way ascent or descent, not both going on at the same time. Thus one angel had to wait for another to descend from heaven to earth and visa versa. Also implied is that an angel (or more of them) was already upon the earth awaiting his turn to ascend. And so on both ends—heaven and earth—we can visualize a long line of angels awaiting their turn. This is what got Jacob’s attention, not so much the ladder or the angels going up and down it. With respect to the ladder, the Hebrew text has “in (*b-*) it,” not on it, implying that the angels were one and the same with the ladder, obviously a means of ascent and descent unlike any other device imaginable.

“And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, ‘I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac’” [vs. 13]. *Natsav* is the verb for “stood,” the same word used in vs. 12 as “set up” with respect to the ladder. Thus it could be said that the ladder and the Lord were one and the same though distinct. As for the Lord, the Hebrew reads “stood upon (*hal*) it” instead of above it. This can also be rendered as “beside it.” He was there at the top helping the angels both coming up and going down so as not to lose their balance and fall off. Those angels who did come to earth scattered about though we have no record of their mission. The same applies when they ascend to heaven. Being messengers by nature (*mal'ak*), they perform functions as in 24.7 when Abraham speaks of an angel accompanying his servant to find a wife for Isaac. The same applied to the three angels who met Abraham before heading toward Sodom and Gomorrah.

As for the Lord, he identifies himself as in 26.24 as the God of both his father and grandfather, this being the first direct contact Jacob had with the divinity. Again we have the familiar words hearkening back to Abraham when he entered Canaan: “the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants.” Canaan is identified as *'erets*, and its possession by Abraham’s descendants takes a step closer to completion. Again, these descendants are likened to dust which covers the earth, words originally put to the then-named Abram in 13.16. These future generations will spread to the four corners of the land upon which Jacob is laying and having his dream. *Parats* is the verb for “spread abroad” originally meaning to break asunder (not unlike dust, the result of crushed stones). “O God, you have rejected us, broken our defenses” [Ps 60.1]. As a result of this spreading-breaking, “shall all the families of the earth bless themselves” or as in the Hebrew, “shall be blessed.” *Mishpachah* is the word for “families” as in 12.3 when Abram was about to leave his native Haran for Canaan. Instead of being associated with *'erets*, these families—the entire earth, really—belong to *'adamah* or more precisely, the ground. So at this early stage of the process of taking over Canaan we see a movement from the more general and imprecise nature of *'adamah*, common to every person on the earth, to the precise *'erets* which later will be called Israel.

“Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land” [vs. 15]. Here we have the third and final “behold” (*hineh*) which is intended to get and retain Jacob’s attention or more precisely, not to allow him to wake from his dream so that the Lord may fully communicate his plan. First, the Lord is “with” Jacob. Second, he will keep or *shamar* him; this verb was last used in 18.19: “to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice.” As noted in that context, *shamar* often refers to a keeping of the Torah. Third and last, the Lord will bring Jacob back to “this land,” *'adamah* being used instead of *'erets*, signifying that Canaan remains un-possessed



by his clan but destined to be theirs. The Lord hints that Jacob will leave Canaan; that happens with his son, Joseph, who set in motion a migration into Egypt which lasted over four hundred years. It was beneficial that Jacob couldn't foresee this future development, for if the Lord had revealed it to him, he would not have continued with the mission begun by Abraham, carried out by Isaac and transmitted to him. Vs. 15 concludes with "I will not leave you until I have done that of which I have spoken to you." *Hazav* is the verb for "leave" and connotes abandonment: "Leave me not nor forsake me" [Ps 27.9]. This must have made Jacob uneasy, the prospect of God abandoning him, even though God says that he will bring to an end what he had spoken, and that which at issue is the promise to possess the land of Canaan.

Jacob awakes from his dream in vs. 18 yet first exclaims (apparently while still dreaming), "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it" [vs. 16]. That is to say, Jacob did not know of the divine presence before his dream. The form of this presence is the Lord standing "upon" the ladder with the angels lined up on earth below and in heaven above, each taking his turn at ascending and descending. Whether or not the angels commented upon the Lord's words spoken to Jacob we do not know; we can assume they did encourage him, even if were a glance as they were on the ladder. Jacob next exclaimed that he was afraid—rightly so—and said "How awesome is this place" [vs. 17]! The word "awesome" is the verb *yare'*, the same as "afraid" in this verse. That is to say, the place (*maqom*) where Jacob stopped for the night was terrifying. Why wouldn't it be with all the angels gathered at the ladder's base, let alone those on top with the Lord himself on hand? Then Jacob continued in vs. 17 saying that this *maqom* was "the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." In sum, the *maqom* went from being an anonymous place to one with a name, rather two names: a *beyth 'elohym* and a *shahar hashamaym*. Yet use of the term *maqom* is revealing, for as noted above, it refers to an inhabited place...and indeed it was inhabited, not by people but by angels. As for the latter, Jacob calls the ladder (*sulam*) a gate or *shahar*. "Open to me the gates of righteousness that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord" [Ps 118.19]. So by identifying this particular place about to be named Bethel or House of God (cf. vs. 19), Jacob intimates that the house is a ladder whose roots are on earth yet reaches heaven. As just depicted, this ladder/gate has angels continuously ascending and descending: they come down (for example) the ladder and then exit the gate or exit to Bethel.

"So Jacob rose early in the morning" [vs. 18]. That is to say, he took that stone-pillow and "set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it." *Matsevah* is the word for "pillar" and almost always refers to an image or idol, this being the first use in the Bible: "He shall break the obelisks of Heliopolis which is in the land of Egypt; and the temples of the gods of Egypt he shall burn with fire" [Jer 43.13]. As for the stone/pillar used by Jacob, it must have been fairly small, not something like an obelisk. To make it more prominent for future use, he must have erected a supporting foundation after which he anointed it with oil. This oil (most likely olive oil) made the stone glisten in the sun and acted as a beacon in the harsh desert sun for all to behold. Only after erection of this stone/pillar did Jacob formally bestow a name upon the nameless *maqom*, Bethel, an abbreviation of *beyth 'elohym* in vs. 17. Only now do we know that the *maqom* had a name, Luz...not only that, it was a city, *hyr* being applicable to a place that is fortified, not necessarily indicative of a large urban area. We can assume that Jacob did not enter Luz but remained close by or outside its gates, quite risky. The inhabitants were those angels who were both ascending and descending the ladder set up between earth and heaven, a very special city. That's why it hadn't been mentioned earlier nor is noted for anything, historically speaking. Once the angel inhabitants knew that a stranger had renamed their city to Bethel, they were delighted and made him an honorary citizen.

Right after having erected his small pillar, Jacob made a vow which begins in vs. 20. He puts a condition upon it, however, by using the word "if" (*im*): "If God will be with me." Surely Jacob had in mind what the Lord said in the dream, namely, that "I will bring you back to this land" [vs. 15]. He

wasn't quite sure what that meant but intimated it was an exile of sorts. Naturally enough, Jacob wanted some insurance as to the vow he was pronouncing here at the newly named city of Bethel. Right away he brought up the fact of being kept or *shamar* by God ('and will keep me in this way that I go') as in vs. 15. Mention of "way" suggests his journey to Laban in the next chapter while intimating the much longer journey—sojourn—in Egypt to be initiated by his son, Joseph. More immediately Jacob has in mind a return to his father's house. If that works out accordingly, "then the Lord shall be my God" [vs. 22]...but if not, then it will not be thus. To conclude his conditional vow, Jacob identifies the stone/pillar as God's house; not that this small-ish monument was the house itself but symbolic of it. Jacob promises to give one tenth of all that the Lord will bestow upon him, words reminiscent of then-named grandfather, Abram, who gave one tenth of his possessions to Melchizedek (cf. 14.20). However, there is no specific mention of this later on.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

This chapter begins an account of the extended stay of Jacob in Haran which turns out to be considerably protracted, a time away from his aged parents but safe from his vengeful brother, Esau. Chances are Jacob didn't go to Haran alone but was accompanied by a retinue of servants. Some of these acted as messengers between Jacob and home, so both parties could be informed as to what was going on. Besides, Jacob had special concern for Rebekah, his mother, who might become the object of vengeance by Esau.

"Then Jacob went on his journey and came to the land of the people of the east." The Hebrew words which begin this chapter read literally "Then Jacob raised his feet"...raised his feet from the newly named Bethel or the place where that ladder into heaven had been erected. Obviously Bethel would be a mandatory stop on the way home with his new bride-to-be. So despite this incredible experience of being among the angels, Jacob was more focused on getting a wife which indicates how powerful is that urge to marry. His trip from Bethel to "the people of the east" was uneventful...thankfully...and terse mention of it intimates Jacob's determination. Over the years while growing up he heard tales of Haran from his grandfather Abraham which were handed down to Isaac. Now he would find out for himself if they were true. As for the people who dwelt there, the phrase "people of the east" is a general expression applicable to the Arameans first found in 11.2: "Now the whole earth had one language and few words. And as men migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there." Not only was Jacob entering a land he had never visited, the place of Abraham's birth, but was going to that place from which the one language spoken by all peoples had originated before the confusion resulting from the tower of Babel. In other words, now he was treading upon sacred soil, unlike Canaan, which for all intensive purposes was an alien place despite divine promises that it would not remain so.

The first thing that Jacob noticed (the words of vs. 2 'as he looked, he saw' indicate paying close attention) was a "well in the field" around which were three flocks of sheep. Given his father Isaac's experience with wells, it is no small wonder that Jacob finds this sight compelling. What made it especially interesting was a lack of shepherds ('three flocks of sheep lying beside it'), but they appear shortly. Jacob was struck by the large stone on the well requiring a number of shepherds to gather in order to roll it back for the sheep to take water. It's size intimates a special well, one with abundant and pure water. Finally the shepherds show up, being from Haran. Jacob was now in that area, the "land of the people of the east," and wanted to make sure they were natives of the area instead of marauding shepherds not unlike those who had plagued his father Isaac. As soon as they identified themselves as from Haran, Jacob asked if they knew Laban, the son of Nahor (cf. vs. 5), and they did. The word *shalom* or peace is used for "well" as when Jacob makes this inquiry. The shepherds say that his

daughter Rachel is about to arrive at the well with her sheep, so this might be the candidate for wife Jacob had set out for. It was almost too good to be true.

Jacob remarks that “it is still high day; it is not time for the animals to be gathered together” [vs. 7]. “High day” reads literally, “great (*gadol*) day” or around noon when the sun is greatest or hottest. Despite this, the shepherds say that Rachel is coming to the well with her sheep knowing full well that it is not time to roll back the huge stone. This was unusual practice because sheep aren’t taken out in the noonday heat; Rachel must have intimated that something out of the ordinary was up, so she came on that hunch. Her father, Laban, must have felt the same way and consented. Then she appears (cf. vs. 9) and once there with all the shepherds—perhaps they gathered early since they, like Rachel, knew something was about to happen—Jacob “rolled the stone from the well’s mouth and watered the flock of Laban, his mother’s brother” [vs. 10]. It was an extraordinary feat of strength for one man which must have impressed both the shepherds and Rachel. But from where did Jacob obtain his strength? Compared with his brother Esau, he was a homebody with no special endowments. If so, they would have been mentioned. The source lay in that vision of the angels at Bethel, he being privy to their point of contact between heaven and earth.

As soon as Jacob had rolled back that stone, he “kissed Rachel and wept aloud” [vs 11]. He didn’t pause to accept the accolades from the shepherds, being interested in Rachel alone. The Hebrew for “wept aloud” reads literally as “raised his voice.” That must have impressed the shepherds just as much as his feat of strength, showing that this man endowed with super-human powers was touched by love and compassion. Once Jacob told Rachel that “he was her father’s kinsman and Rebekah’s son” [vs. 12], she ran home to tell her father. Again, the shepherds were astonished and talked with Jacob during the interlude it took for Laban to meet Jacob at the well. It’s interesting to note that first Rachel ran home and then Laban ran to Jacob (cf. vss. 12 & 13). Upon reaching home with the shepherds trailing behind marveling at all this, Laban says to Jacob, “Surely you are my bone and my flesh” [vs. 14], words echoing the first man upon seeing the first woman: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” [2.23]. This dramatic encounter between long-lost relatives concludes with Jacob staying a month, a time of considerable joy touched with a desire to get back home to Rebekah with Rachel in tow as his bride.

So after one month Laban gradually lets onto Jacob his character: “Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing” [vs. 15]? Jacob didn’t come to Haran to hire himself out; he could have done that in Canaan. At the same time, Laban was laying down the condition for Jacob to take Rachel as his bride. Vs. 16 comes in as a kind of after-thought: “Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah and the name of the younger was Rachel.” Of course we know about Rachel, but this verse comes in, as it were, from Laban’s point of view. Jacob must have known about Leah before he arrived in Haran and wasn’t at all attracted to her: “Leah’s eyes were weak but Rachel was beautiful and lovely” [vs.17]. The adjective for “weak” is *rak* which alternately means tender but here implies a certain lack-luster or dullness of heart as revealed through the eyes. “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” [Prov 15.1]. All in all, most biblical references to *rak* are positive. On the other hand, Rachel was “beautiful and lovely,” words not necessarily pertaining to her eyes but to her as a whole. The adjective “beautiful” is expressed by two words, *yephath-to’ar*, literally as “fair as form.” *Yapheh* can apply to both men and women, implying excellency as in Ecc 3.11: “He has made everything beautiful in its time.” As for the noun *to’ar*, usually it applies to humans and animals. “Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking” [39.6]. So if Leah were endowed just as much as her sister, Rachel, still she wouldn’t have stood out due to her weak eyes which betrayed so much of her character.

And so Jacob concedes to Laban's request; rather, he outdoes him by saying "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel" [vs. 19]. That is, Jacob came up with the outrageous term of seven long years of exile in Haran, apparently having lost all thought of the mission entrusted to him. Although his devotion is impressive, it doesn't put him in a good light at all. Eagerly Laban agreed to take on Jacob for seven years. Who could blame him? At the same time, this doesn't put Laban in exactly the best light either. He was fully aware of his brother-in-law Isaac's situation, that he was heir to continue Abraham's original mandate to take over Canaan. Now Laban is just as much an obstacle as to that divine plan. "So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her" [vs. 20]. During this period some of that extraordinary strength revealed at the well must have manifested itself which contributed greatly to Laban's household. Both he and Jacob seemed to have struck a happy bargain, happy with the exception of both Leah and Rachel. The former was shunted off to the sidelines whereas the latter had to endure seven years of waiting. But for Jacob these seven years were, as the text says literally, "as days ones," *'echad* being the word for "few."

Vs. 21 begins rather abruptly with "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed." That is to say, the seven years as "days ones" came to an end for Jacob and just as quickly for Laban, for he was the one who benefitted from this service. The Hebrew for "time" is "days" (*yamay*) which for both men were as "ones." To celebrate, Laban went along with Jacob's request by gathering all the men of the place (*maqom*, vs. 22) which included those shepherds Jacob initially encountered at the well. They all testified to the wonderful deeds he had done over the past seven years and may have had a hand in Laban's ploy to keep him on for another seven. But before this, Laban tries to pull yet another fast one on Jacob by bringing in Leah with her weak eyes by the dim light of evening. Jacob's eyes must have been just as weak, for he had intercourse with Leah (cf. vs. 23). So if both had weak eyes, at least momentarily for Jacob, it doesn't say much about his character. Surely Leah could have been excused for not recognizing Jacob in the evening twilight ('in the evening,' vs. 23), but Jacob? His weakness was an inability to control himself. In the morning light he caught on to Laban's trick and exclaimed, "Why have you deceived me" [vs. 25]? *Ramah* is the verb for "deceived" and fundamentally means to cast, throw or shoot with a bow. "I called to my lovers but they deceived me" [Lam 1.19].

Laban responded to Jacob's just complaint with the half-hearted excuse, "It is not done in our country (*maqom* or place as in vs. 22), to give the younger before the first-born" [vs. 26]. He continues by asking Jacob to "complete the week of this one" or the week of the marriage festivity after which he will give Rachel to him...after yet another seven years. At this point you'd think Jacob would either kill Laban or simply give up. However, readily he consented to this request. As noted earlier with regard to the first seven year period, it's surprising to find Jacob so unmindful of his father's request to bring back a bride fairly soon in order to continue the lineage with a view to gaining control over Canaan. Jacob must have informed Isaac on both occasions as well as Rebekah, all this because out of fear for Esau. After all, Esau still wanted to get revenge for having been cheated out of his birth right. So all tacitly agreed that a grand total of fourteen years would be sufficient for passions to cool. Once Jacob had completed his week pertinent to the marriage festivity, "Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to wife" [vs. 28]. Was this second stretch of seven years as "days one" (vs. 21) for Jacob? The text is silent on the matter implying it wasn't, for Laban had outwitted Jacob again by giving him the unwanted Leah. Nevertheless, vs. 30 re-affirms Jacob's love for Rachel.

Now the Lord himself steps in and makes known his preference. It's strange at first that he isn't concerned with the people back in Canaan struggling along as best they can, but this proves not to be the case. He was more interested in Jacob having twelve sons, the source of the twelve tribes of Israel.



However, those in Canaan must have felt deserted both by Jacob and by the Lord, even more so when they got wind of Jacob happily married and his failure to return home. The Lord saw that “Leah was hated and opened her womb, but Rachel was barren” [vs. 31]. This seeing implies that despite implicit lack of mention of the Lord for much of Chapter Twenty-Nine, he was there all along observing. It was Leah of the weak eyes that finally moved him to pity Leah. As for Rachel, the words “was barren” leaves open that the Lord may or may not have been responsible directly for this apparent tragedy. All this was reminiscent of Sarah and Hagar, a fact that must not have escaped Jacob’s mind. Leah’s fruitfulness was manifested by her bearing four sons.

The first son born of Leah of the weak eyes was Reuben who was the first of twelve sons, the other mothers being the maids Bilhah (belonging to Rachel) and Zilpah (belonging to Leah) in the next chapter. Twelve births translate into nine months pregnancy for each one. Even if the intervals is relatively short (and we get this feel from the narrative), we could posit some two to three months in between each birth. That totals to one hundred and eight months of pregnancy in by itself coupled with another thirty-six months of interval time resulting in a final tally of approximately one-hundred and forty-four months or twelve years. And if we add the fourteen years of Jacob’s service to Laban, the grand total is twenty-six years. And to think that Jacob left his aging father Isaac who, as it turns out, is still alive!

As for the birth of Reuben, we have a derivation of his name by the circumstances of Leah’s pregnancy, a manner of bestowing names that follows for the next eleven sons: “Because the Lord has looked upon my affliction” [vs. 32]. This verse shows a correlation between the Lord seeing (*ra’ah*) Leah in vs. 31 and fulfilment of this seeing, of directed toward Leah’s affliction. The word is prefaced by the preposition in (*b-*) rendering it more exactly as “has looked *in* my affliction” or has looked right into her soul. Wonderful as this *ra’ah* is, it doesn’t remain abstract but assumes the form of a human being, Reuben, whose name translates as “see, a son.” However, Leah’s joy is tinged with some sorrow: “now my husband will love me.” A hopeful exclamation, for Jacob had sexual relations with Leah by mistake, thinking she was Rachel. Leah names her second son Simeon after the verbal root for “to hear” which is *shamah*. To see involves greater distance from the object seen compared with hearing, so the Lord must have drawn closer to Leah that she may conceive and give birth to Simeon. Finally Leah gives birth to a third son named Levi: “Now this time my husband will be joined to me because I have borne him three sons” [vs. 34].

During her first two births Leah complains about Jacob’s lack of love and her being hated due to her weak eyes compared with the gorgeous Rachel. The verbal root for the proper name Levi is *lawah* or “to join.” It also means to borrow, receive as a loan or to lend. For a use similar to the one at hand, refer to Num 18.2: “And with you bring your brethren also, the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, that they may join you and minister to you.” The fourth and final son is Judah: “This time I will praise (*hodah*) the Lord” [vs. 35]. Chapter Twenty-Nine comes to a happy conclusion with the words, “then she ceased bearing” and thus sets the stage for Rachel.

### Chapter Thirty

This chapter is a continuation of the last one, that is to say, as related to the birth of Jacob’s sons; to date four have been born to Leah who was known for her weak eyes (cf. 29.17). Now attention shifts to the younger Rachel: “When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister” [vs. 1]. *Qana*’ is the verb for “envied” and often as is the case with jealousy, associated with anger. “And his brothers were jealous of him (Joseph), but his father kept the saying in mind” [37.11]. This jealousy/anger took voice in Rachel exclaims in the same verse, “Give me children or I shall die!”

Such is the curse of barrenness, for it means that the family name will not be carried on. Her cry of desperation didn't mollify Jacob who blurts out, "Am I in the place of God who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb" [vs. 2]? The preposition *tachat* (under) is used for "in the place" of God or the equivalent of saying, "Am I a substitute for God?" By these words Jacob is saying that he is just as frustrated as Rachel which included awareness of having had sexual relations with Rachel's elder sister. If Jacob had been in God's place, surely he would have granted fertility to his wife.

Rachel breaks the tension with the words, "Here is my maid Bilhah; go in to her that she may bear upon my knees" [vs. 3]. This is the second time Jacob would have intercourse with a woman away from Canaan, something his father Isaac would not have approved. However, it was of vital importance to fulfil the divine commission with providing future generations. Though we don't pick up direct mention of this, surely it underlies Jacob's intention. A lingering doubt remains: can we be sure of Jacob's intention after being away from Canaan some fourteen years? Would he be accepted if he returned? Going there with a barren wife would be most shameful and invite special scorn from his brother Esau. As for Rachel wishing Bilhah to "bear upon my knees," it is a way of her to identify with her maid and give birth by a kind of proxy. There is nothing further said about Bilhah once she has given birth; though the child was hers physically, it belonged to Rachel because Bilhah was a slave without any rights. As for the word "maid," vs. 2 has *'amah* whereas vs. 4 has *shiphchah*. The former applies to a female slave in general whereas the latter to a maid considered part of the family. For the difference, see 1Sam 25.41: "Behold, your handmaid (*'amah*) is a servant (*shiphchah*) to wash the feet of the servants of my lord." That is to say, I (Abigail) am your household servant ready to wait upon you.

And so, Bilhah bears Jacob a son after which Rachel exclaims "God has judged me and has also heard my voice and has given me a son" [vs. 6]. Such was her response to Jacob's claim to being in God's place and having the capacity to decide human affairs. As for Bilhah who did the childbearing, she doesn't utter a word as she gave birth upon Rachel's knees which must have degraded her to the utmost degree. Furthermore, it reveals not just the cunningness of Rachel but her cruelty...this on top of her claiming that God had judged favorably on her behalf. So there was Bilhah on top of Rachel with her mistress pretending to give birth yet having the audacity to claim the infant as her own. While this is stated explicitly, the actual birth isn't mentioned. The presumed reason is that it is too humiliating. As for the child, Rachel named it Dan which derived from the verbal root *dyn* (to judge) as Rachel had uttered in vs. 6. Not exactly the best named to carry around, given the circumstances.

Verses 7 and 8 recounts the second humiliation of Bilhah at the hands of Rachel, the latter reading "With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister and have prevailed." *Patal* is the verb for "wrestling" which fundamentally means to be twisted and has just four other biblical references. "With the pure you show yourself pure, and with the crooked you show yourself perverse" [Ps 18.26]. By way of note, the noun *patyl* (bracelet is derived from it due to the twistings and turnings of such an ornament). If the proper name Dan is something to be ashamed above as noted in the last paragraph, being tagged with Naphtali is worse! However, Rachel's wrestling with Leah are based in reality yet again leave out poor Bilhah who did the actual child bearing. Certainly credit must be given to Bilhah for having to endure a second humiliation. Chances are quite a few people were standing around at these two births, one of whom was there ready to throw Bilhah off Rachel's knees as soon as she had given birth...not thrown away but thrown aside for future possible use. As for these wrestlings with Leah, Rachel had prevailed, *yachal* being the verbal root. "Sorely have they afflicted me from my youth, yet they have not prevailed against me" [Ps 129.2]. We haven't a clue what Jacob may have thought except that he was enjoying all these sexual relations. If he had misgivings, surely they would have been recorded.

While Rachel had been observing her fruitful elder sister giving birth to four sons, Leah decided to take matters into her own hands and imitate her. As with Bilhah, we have no response from Jacob, most likely happy to oblige two desperate women. “When Leah saw that she had ceased bearing children, she took her maid Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife” [vs. 9]. That is to say, Leah lost her fertility sometime after having given birth to Reuben, Simeon and Judah. It shows just as much cunning for a woman with weak eyes as her younger, more attractive sister. However, we don’t see Leah stooping to such as low as placing her maid upon her knees while pretending to be the woman giving birth. Usually the man is the one giving and taking a woman in such affairs, yet here we have two women engaged in it that activity which is below their dignity yet reveals the depth of their desperation. The name of this fourth child born by way of proxy is Gad due to Leah’s exclamation “Good fortune” or *gad* which seems to have been taken from the Babylonian god for fortune and worshiped by the Jews when they were taken captive. There is one other biblical reference: “But you who forsake the Lord, who forget my holy mountain, who set a table for Fortune and fill cups of mixed wine for Destiny” [Is 65.11].

Without missing a beat, Leah matches Jacob, technically the husband of her sister Rachel, by presenting Zilpah yet again for the purpose of begetting a second son whom Leah calls Asher: “Happy am I! For the women will come to me happy” [vs. 13]. “Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight” [Mal 3.12]. The verbal root is *’ashar* (to be straight, successful, prosper) and reveals Leah’s attitude, her desire for respect among her female peers who without a doubt had been monitoring closely this duel between Leah and Rachel with two helpless maids as their pawns. Still, this drama has plenty of action to go until the full complement of twelve sons are born, fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel.

“In the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field and brought them to his mother Leah” [vs. 14]. Reuben is the first son born of this “dual” between Leah and Rachel and to date had witnessed the birth of six children. It must have been confusing for a youth, a strange competition between two women in their desire to become pregnant, even it was by proxy. Mention of the wheat harvest implies late summer or early autumn with Reuben as eldest son possibly being in charge of it. *Duday* is the word for “mandrake,” all but one biblical references occurring in these story, the other being Sg 7.13: “The mandrakes give forth fragrance, and over our doors are all choice fruits.” This word is derived from the verbal root *dod* (to love). The impression we get from Reuben’s discovery of this fruit is it had been there prior to the wheat which sprung up later and concealed it. Since the workers were in haste like all other harvesters to bring in the crop, they focused on the job at hand, not anything extraordinary. However, the mandrakes left behind caught Reuben’s attention or it was brought to his attention by one of the harvesters. He knew their amatory property so decided to bring them to his mother, Leah, who was losing that competition with her younger sister or Reuben’s aunt. Rachel got notice of her nephew’s discovery of these mandrakes because she said “Give me, I pray, some of your son’s mandrakes” [vs 14]. Leah responded harshly as expected: “Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband?” Rachel offered a deal to this retort: “Then he may lie with you tonight for your son’s mandrakes” [vs. 15].

This offer demonstrates how desperate Rachel had become, to hire out her husband to her sister in exchange for mandrakes which she believed would cure her inability to bear children. Jacob, as had been the case throughout this drama, simply complies to lie with whomever asks him! Now it’s his turn with Leah who initially had been rejected over the fairer Rachel. With the conception of this, Leah’s fifth son (the first two technically were hers whereas the others came from her maid, Bilhah), God enters the scene: “And God hearkened to Leah” [vs. 17]. Apparently the morality of what had

been transpiring didn't concern God; he was more focused on getting twelve sons into the world, legitimate or illegitimate, and using Jacob as a kind of stud for this purpose. Once all had been born, the drama could continue with a detour—and a major one at that—into Egypt from the promised land of Canaan. The name of this fifth son was Issachar because Leah exclaimed “God has given me my hire because I gave my maid to my husband” [vs. 18]. *Sakar* is the verbal root for “hire” from which Issachar is derived and certainly not a flattering proper name. “Because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor...to curse you” [Dt 23.4].

Leah found her eldest son's mandrakes effective, for she bore Jacob a sixth son and exclaimed “God has endowed me with a good dowry; now my husband will honor me because I have borne him six sons” [vs. 21]. The name of this son was Zebulun from the verbal root at hand (i.e., ‘endowed’) being *zavad*, the only instance in the Bible. Reuben's mandrakes continued their effect with the birth of the first daughter whom Leah named Dinah who will figure predominantly in Chapter Thirty-Four. Her birth must have come as a surprise...a disappointment...for in the eyes of Leah, Jacob and the others, Dinah set back what they perceived was an unstoppable advancement to give birth to twelve sons, all being aware to one degree or another of this quota. All this began, it must be kept in mind, with Isaac sending his son Jacob to Laban that he may marry and return home as soon as possible. If he had someone like that anonymous yet faithful servant of Abraham returning home with Rebekah as a bride for Isaac, things would have turned out differently.

Now it was Rachel's turn, for God remembered her, vs. 22. The verb here is *zakar* from which is derived the noun (same spelling) “male” and has clear application for the drama at hand. It was Rachel in her desperation who asked for those mandrakes her nephew had discovered in the field after the wheat harvest. With this tussle between two sisters going on before Reuben, he must have been amazed at the power of this fruit and secretly kept an eye-out for any other mandrakes spotted in the fields for his own use. The birth of this the final of the twelve sons between Leah and Rachel, Bilhah and Ziphah, is the one who will figure most prominently in the rest of the book of Genesis and beyond, namely, Joseph. As for this proper name, Rachel associates it with the words “May the Lord add to me another son” [vs. 24]! The verbal root *yasaph* is the word for “add.” The adding, as it were, applies to the two sons borne through Bilhah, Dan and Naphtali. Surely there must have been tension between these two and Joseph, a foreshadowing of the greater tension between him and his brothers.

So with the birth of twelve sons which will end up in Jacob's custody, they have a less than desirable origin as indicated by their names. Though in many ways fanciful, the way they obtained their names reveals less than desirable human qualities at the service of in a larger scale of things, the tribes which would participate in the Exodus from Egypt and the population (rather, re-population) of Canaan destined to become Israel.

After such an ordeal Jacob finally said to Laban, “Send me away, that I may go to my own home and country” [vs. 25], that is, after a total of some twenty-six years away from Canaan which he calls his *maqom* (home or place) and *'erets* (country). Both terms are revealing in that Jacob, unlike his father and grandfather, had come to accept Canaan as his native soil; the land from which they had come and where he now found himself was alien to him despite having spent so much time there. Jacob's request comes right after the first words of the same verse, “When Rachel had borne Joseph.” These words mean that Joseph's birth was a signal to Jacob; though no divine intervention is noted, he intuited that at last his mission had been accomplished. Also he figured that his brother Esau's wrath would be abated by now, provided he was still alive. If Esau had died—and chances were high due his love of hunting—word would have reached Jacob, so that option was ruled out. Furthermore, Jacob asks of Laban his wives (that is, Leah and Rachel) and his thirteen children, Dinah being the sole female child



born to him. His appeal to Laban was “the service which I have given you” [vs. 26]. The word for “service” is *havodah*, a word referring both to deeds accomplished as well as bondage, and here is in reference to 29.27: “Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.”

Laban counters Jacob’s request with a claim that he has “learned by divination that the Lord has blessed me because of you” [vs. 27]. A verb is used for “divination” or *nachash* and referred to the serpent which tempted the first woman: “Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the Lord God had made” [3.1]. As noted there, the verbal root means to whisper or hiss; also it means to practice divinization or sorcery. The idea is that a sorcerer hisses or whispers quietly while performing an incantation so other people may not be privy to what’s going on. Laban was a dual blessing to Jacob: two daughters by which he (and through the medium of their respective maids) had children and a subtle, wily individual who did his best to keep Jacob in his service as long as possible. The means by which Laban had obtained this *nachash* isn’t disclosed though Jacob had intimations of his deceit early on which is why he doesn’t question him as to its source. After making this rather cryptic statement, Laban asks Jacob with what will turn out as feigned to “name his wages,” the verb being *naqav*. This word is a bit unusual insofar as it refers to piercing as well as making a curse. “And he who blasphemes the name of the Lord” [Lev 24.16]. On the positive side, *naqav* suggests making a direct request minus the prospect of bargaining.

Jacob points to his service of minding Laban’s cattle, the first time this is mentioned as opposed to watching sheep which one would expect by the first encounter Jacob had with the shepherds at the well with the huge stone. “For you had little before I came, and it has increased abundantly; and the Lord has blessed you wherever I turned” [vs. 30]. Apparently Jacob’s chief task was to increase the small herd of cattle in Laban’s care. The Hebrew for “increased abundantly” is *yiprots larov* or “overflowed to excess,” the verb *parats* implying that the small herd spread out in all directions. As for the verb “turned,” it is lacking in the text which reads “blessed you to (or at) my feet.” Immediately after this statement and in the same verse Jacob asks “When shall I provide for my own household also?” Such a question took Laban by surprise and showed Jacob’s determination to move on. So for payment Laban agreed that Jacob would “feed your flock and keep it” [vs. 31], this time referring to sheep, not cattle. Presumably that would involve working with the shepherds of Haran and that large stone which Jacob could remove unassisted.

Now the remainder of Chapter Thirty goes into considerable detail where Jacob separates “speckled and spotted sheep and every black lamb, and the spotted and speckled among the goats; and such shall be my wages” [vs. 32]. As a footnote to the **Oxford RSV** has it, “stripped or speckled coloration was unusual, and Laban seemingly had nothing to lose.” Yet again Laban reveals his true colors. He put the sheep desired by Jacob under the care of his sons and “set a distance of three days’ journey between himself and Jacob” [vs. 36]. This readiness to get up and go isn’t unusual for nomads, so with some preparation Laban figured he could outrun Jacob. Besides, his sons would offer protection. Vs. 36 ends on an unexpected note: “and Jacob fed the rest of Laban’s flock” which suggests that he had a trick in store for Laban. So vss. 37 to the conclusion of this chapter go at length as to how Jacob managed to raise stronger sheep and leave the feebler with Laban. Actually the separation of three days’ journey worked out well for Jacob; he could get working at this tedious breeding process unhindered. “Thus the man (Jacob) grew exceedingly rich and had large flocks, maid servants and men servants and camels and asses” [vs. 43]. *Parats* is the verb for “grew rich,” the same verb used in vs. 30 when Jacob claimed that he was responsible for Laban’s increase of cattle. And so this last verse of Chapter Thirty shows that the last word and last laugh of Jacob was on Laban for whom he had labored so diligently. You’d think Laban would have known Jacob’s ingenuity and resourcefulness by now but

apparently did not.

## Chapter Thirty-One

Vs. 26 of the last chapter has Laban putting “a distance of the three days’ journey between himself and Jacob” while Jacob remained in his uncle’s encampment tending the flock that had been left behind. Despite the distance between the two, Jacob got wind of Laban’s sons claiming they were cheated of their wealth which presumably was a potential inheritance. This worried Jacob, for years earlier he had cheated his brother Esau from his birthright and knew firsthand what vengeance that could instigate. Note that Jacob heard—he didn’t have direct contact—and knew the report could be filtered with all sorts of exaggerations, etc. The bone of contention at hand was “wealth” or *kavod* which more familiarly means “glory” and involves the reputation of the person possessing the wealth. Should Jacob not return the *kavod* to Laban’s sons (their number is unspecified), they would lose that honor as well. This incident discloses yet again Laban’s cunning and cowardice, thinking he could get away with cheating Jacob not directly but through his sons. Vs. 2 continues with a kind of understatement, “And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him with favor as before”...as if he had held Jacob in regard to begin with or better, honored him only to squeeze as much work from him as he could. The Hebrew text for “did not regard him with favor as before” reads literally “behold, there was not with him as before.”

Now the Lord himself decided to intervene without Jacob having asked for divine assistance which means he had a vested interest in the matter at hand: “Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you” [vs. 3]. These words must have reminded Jacob of his grandfather Abraham’s divine calling only in the latter case, the “land” had been completely alien. What’s interesting here is that despite piecemeal efforts to establish themselves, Abraham’s descendants were now on a surer footing. Personally the Lord’s words were reassuring for Jacob, that is, “and to your kindred” or to those in Canaan whom he haven’t seen in some twenty-six years. The Lord knew them as well as Jacob, that they continued to remember him as one of their own. Yet there loomed in the background Esau, an uncomfortable threat that could upset everything.

Jacob accepts the divine intervention without giving a response. He must have been delighted to at last get this confirmation to rid himself once and for all of Laban and the memory of having been tricked so many times. Immediately Jacob called both Leah and Rachel “into the field where his flock was” [vs. 4]. That may have been risky, given the intense rivalry over who could get pregnant first and produce the most children for Jacob, and explains the situation which runs through vs. 13. First Jacob tells them that although he has lost favor in their father’s eyes, “the God of my father has been with me” [vs. 5], that is, the God of Isaac. Surely Jacob must have in mind Isaac’s experience as a youth when placed by his father upon the altar as a sacrifice, an unforgettable memory, which was drilled into his mind as a life-changing event. If the Lord could rescue Isaac at the very last minute, why couldn’t he do the same for his son? Jacob then reminds the two sisters of having served Laban “with all my strength” [vs. 7]...not an exaggeration but literally as we had seen with the stone he removed from the well, strength that was directed to other tasks. Laban had both cheated Jacob and changed his wages ten times, the former verb being *talal* which also means to mock. “A deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself” [Is 44.20]. True words, yet Jacob knew this early on and decided to remain with Laban out of love for Rachel which unexpectedly resulted in him being responsible for the birth of twelve sons and one daughter. At the same time, Jacob acknowledges God’s role in not permitting Laban to harm him (cf. vs. 7), the verb being *raha* as noted in 26.29, this word being the root for *rah* or evil (adjective). Though the Lord was protecting Jacob against this potential, Laban never seems to have wished evil, just to milk him for what he was worth.

Next Jacob recounts to Leah and Rachel the story about the animals from their father's flocks as his wages and the dream he had of the spotted he-goats which leaped upon the flock (cf. vs. 11). The literal way of putting "saw in a dream" is "I raised my eyes and saw in a dream." That is, first Jacob raised his eyes before his dream or before he went asleep and beheld the situation at hand. While distinct, the two form a whole and correspond to reality, a fact that is confirmed by an angel of the Lord who first summoned him by calling out his proper name (cf. vs. 11). The intent was to grab Jacob's attention within the dream after which Jacob responded with "Here I am." That is to say, despite being asleep, Jacob was fully attentive to anything the Lord might communicate to him. The angel's words were reassuring: "I have seen all that Laban is doing to you" [vs. 12]. Such words come from an angel and correspond to the Lord who is watching the situation as well, the angel being an intermediary or message as is his task, *mal'ak*. The identity between the angel who addressed Jacob and the Lord fuse into one, if you will, with vs. 13: "I am the God of Bethel where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me." For Jacob, these words were just as good as having been uttered an hour ago despite the fact that it occurred twenty-six years earlier before he had met Laban. Indeed this was a powerful experience, of seeing the angels ascending and descending upon a ladder and the name of place changed from Luz to Bethel. If Jacob did not have that dream—note that reference to it takes place within a second dream—never could he have survived such a prolonged ordeal outside his native homeland. The vow to which the Lord/angel refers is that of 28.20-22, of giving a tenth of all what the Lord gives to him back to the Lord. Apparently that turned out to be quite significant over the coming years. If it weren't for mindfulness of that vow, Jacob have faltered in his promise, something to his credit.

Jacob's dream ends with an echo of vs. 3 or a return to "the land of your fathers" though there is no hint of a dream in that communication: "Now arise, go forth from this land and return to the land of your birth" [vs. 13]. These words are more significant than those of vs. 3 because the issue of ownership of the flocks is settled now. The command "arise" is something like the Lord saying to Jacob, wake up and get moving at once. And to hear those words "land ('erets) of your birth" were even more welcome. Both Rachel and Leah were present as soon as Jacob had woken up after this dream, standing around him in anticipation. At the same time, they knew not to rouse him from slumber and hence from his dream which would have spoiled everything.

The sisters had two pressing questions, the first one being "Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father's house" [vs. 14]? *Cheleq* and *nachalah* are the words for "portion and inheritance," the first last noted in 14.24 though in a sense different from the one at hand. This is the first time *nachalah* is used, an important term in both the books of Numbers and Joshua to drill into the Israelites that the land which they occupy is indeed theirs; more specifically, that it was passed down to them from earlier generations. "Joshua gave it (the whole land) for an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal allotments" [Jos 11.23]. The second question put to Jacob is "Are we not regarded by him (Laban) as foreigners" [vs. 15]? *Nakry* is the singular for "foreigner" or the exact opposite of one with the right to *cheleq* and *nachalah*, portion and inheritance. "I have been a stranger in a strange land" [Ex 2.2]. Most likely Leah and Rachel were referring to how their father offered Jacob as a husband, not caring about their welfare, but to milk Jacob for what he was worth. Their association with Jacob make them like objects in their father's eyes, a sad state of affairs but consistent with Laban's character. Both women continue with another lament in the same verse (15), "For he has sold us, and he has been using the money given for us."

Despite the lament to Jacob by Leah and Rachel, they've managed to come off nicely: "All the property which God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children; now then, whatever God has said to you, do" [vs. 16]. *Hosher* is the word for "property" and alternately means "riches;" the

verbal root *hashar* means to be happy. The instrument, of course, by which the Lord has defrauded Laban is Jacob who manages to turn the tables on him. Since the two women...wives...have a collective authority of sorts, they could urge their husband to do what he wants, and that is to get away from Laban as quickly and as far as possible. Vs. 17 lends a certain tenderness to this haste: “and (Jacob) set his sons and his wives on camels.” Next Jacob rustled up the cattle and livestock he had acquired in Paddan-aram (cf. vs. 18) and headed to Canaan and his father as vs. 18 states. Jacob must have wondered considerably about Isaac; the last time they had met some twenty-six years ago Isaac was confined to his bed seemingly on the verge of death. Would he still be in the same bed as Jacob had left him? And what about his mother, Rebekah, and more importantly than all, his brother Esau?

While Jacob had been preparing his family and possessions for the trek back to Canaan, Rachel decided to play the ultimate dirty trick on her father, that is, she “stole her father’s household gods” [vs. 19]. Perhaps she conjectured that without them, her father would be powerless when he sought their consultation. This context seems different from the one of 30.36 where Laban put a distance of three days’ journey between him and Jacob. The idea seems to be yes, Laban did move on to escape any vengeance from Jacob yet remained sufficiently close for both parties to have some interaction. The three days’ journey is more the setting up of a buffer zone between two conflicting parties than an outright escape. With this in mind, vs. 19’s words “Laban had gone to shear his sheep” makes more sense. The word for “household gods” is *teraphym* and applies to images in the idolatrous sense. Their Western counterpart are the Roman Penates. “For the teraphim utter nonsense, and the diviners see lies; the dreamers tell false dreams and give empty consolation” [Zech 10.2].

Another indication that Jacob and Laban were within speaking distance, albeit a situation where each was wary of the other, is that Jacob “did not tell him that he intended to flee” [vs. 21]. These words are prefaced in the same verse with “And Jacob outwitted Laban the Aramean.” The Hebrew has for “outwitted” *yignov* ‘*eth-lev* or literally “stole the heart.” Combine this stealing with Rachel’s stealing (*ganav* is the verb used twice here) of the *teraphym* belonging to her father, and you have a double-whammy bestowed upon Laban for all the trouble he had caused...not with the intent to harm people but to put them and keep them in his service, pretty much reduced to serfs and just short of being slaves. Furthermore, calling Laban an Aramean was a further insult, identifying him as an inhabitant of Mesopotamia compared with the relatively newly established group of emigrants from Haran, also of the Mesopotamian region. Thus “Aramean” suggests not just that a distance from Abraham’s heritage but a distance from that culture with a view towards the future or establishment of Israel in Canaan. This preference for the future, although still fraught with uncertainty, applies to both Leah and Rachel. The latter’s stealing of her father’s gods wasn’t a desire to bring them to Canaan but can be understood within the larger implication of getting rid of that idolatrous past. Vs. 21 bears that out with “He fled with all that he had and arose and crossed the Euphrates and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead.” First comes fleeing (*barach*: connotes a passing through) followed by a rising (*qom*) which can intimate determination at the banks of the Euphrates followed by a crossing (*havar*) of that river and finally, a setting (*sum*: to put) of face toward Gilead. Gilead is the mountainous region east of the Jordan River, the first time noted in Genesis. All terms suggest determination and a desire to get away from Laban and reach the safety of Canaan.

“When it was told Laban on the third day.” Such are the opening words of vs. 22, significant because the verb “was told” implies that some of Laban’s party was spying continuously upon Jacob. It wasn’t difficult to spot such a large group of people, cattle and sheep making their way toward Gilead, so either way, Laban got wind of this exodus. The two groups encountered each other “in the hill country of Gilead” or close to the border with Canaan, tantalizingly close to home. The two verbs describing Laban and his band’s pursuit are parallel in meaning to those relative to Jacob’s departure: “pursued”



and “followed close” or *radaph* and *davaq* (to cling as in 2.24: ‘Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife’). And so, Laban wasted no time in an attempt to overtake Jacob before he got within the safe confines of Canaan. At the same time, perhaps he tried to contact Esau and make an alliance against Jacob, but there’s no record of that. Should this alliance had materialized, Jacob would be in dire straits.

Now the Lord himself decides to intervene not directly but indirectly or through a dream just as he had done with Jacob: “Take heed that you say not a word to Jacob, either good or bad” [vs. 24]. Note that Laban is identified yet again as an Aramean, this time by God. As noted above, this identification sets Laban apart from the divine preference for the newly established generations in Canaan descended from Abraham. Given Laban’s character, communicating with him through a dream was the only way to reach him or to be more blunt, only when he was asleep. The Lord cautions Laban to *shamar* or to “take heed” not to speak about Jacob whether it might be good or otherwise. The last time this verb had been noted was 28.15, co-incidentally in a dream: “Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.” Here *shamar* is more in tune with the way Laban operates, that is, his love of spreading lies; he’s not outrightly evil but prefers to slander people indirectly in order to profit from them.

“And Laban overtook Jacob” [vs., 25]. Such is the haste at which Laban arises from his dream, possibly pursuing Jacob that very night, the verb being *nagash* last noted in 18.23: “Then Abraham drew near and said.” The latter sense of *nagash* is more accurate insofar as Laban did not overtake Jacob but simply came closer to him. Jacob had pitched camp in the hill country whereas Laban did so “in the hill country of Gilead” inferring that Laban indeed advanced further into Gilead and thus closer to Canaan than Jacob. Perhaps he wished to outflank Jacob and prevent entry into that country. Instead of engaging in outright conflict the two men decided to meet, again, in that hill country. Distance between them could have been very close, given the rugged terrain. In typical fashion Laban began whining that he had been cheated or literally, why did Jacob steal (*ganav*) his heart, the same words used in vs. 20 (‘And Jacob outwitted Laban’). This *ganav* applied to Jacob supposedly having stolen Leah and Rachel, a sentiment Laban must have wanted to communicate to them. Surely Jacob foresaw this and kept both daughters out of ear shot of their conversation, easy to do amid the hilly landscape. Laban continues his whining that Jacob had fled secretly and had cheated him, the second instance of *ganav* which is ironic for someone who had defrauded Jacob over so many years. If Jacob had shown signs of hesitation as to how he treated Laban, quickly they dissolved with the words “that I might have sent you away with mirth and songs, with tambourine and lyre” [vs. 27]. The third and final lament—and by this time Jacob must have been privately smirking to himself—“Why did you not permit me to kiss my sons and my daughters farewell” [vs. 28]? Laban concludes his three-fold lament to Jacob with “Now you have done foolishly” or *sakal*. “Behold, I have played the fool and have erred exceedingly” [1Sam 26.21].

Any feelings Jacob may have entertained of having gotten the better of Laban evaporated with his threat, “It is in my power to do you harm.” Note the word for “power” (*el*) which literally reads “God.” This doesn’t mean that Laban has God in control to do his bidding but is a term showing that the divinity is identified with (almighty) power or lordship. Still, coming from Laban it is menacing. Fortunately for Jacob and unknowingly to him, the Lord had appeared to Laban, a fact which Laban acknowledged readily: “but the God of your father spoke to me last night.” Looking back on that dream, God didn’t identify himself with Isaac (i.e., Jacob’s father) but somehow he intuitively knew it was so. Anyway, who else would stick up for Jacob? Laban elaborates upon this dream in accord with its content, that is, “take heed that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad” [vs. 20]. If it weren’t for this divine intervention, never could have Laban done otherwise; it was simply not part of his character.

He is correct, however, with what comes next: “And now you have gone away because you longed greatly for your father’s house” [vs. 30]. The verb *kasaph* (actually twice, the second standing for ‘greatly’) which means to become pale, the idea being that blood drains from one’s body when intense desire is present. “My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord” [Ps 84.2]. Laban could understand that but throws in the question (same verse), “why did you steal my gods,” ‘*eloyah*’ (singular) being the term. In vs. 19 Rachel had stolen the gods belonging to the household or *teraphym*, a term associated with idolatrous images. Laban knew this was true and wanted to save face before Jacob by using ‘*eloyah*, not *teraphym*. That would be especially embarrassing if Leah were nearby listening in to this conversation.

In this tense situation with each party facing each other Jacob figured it was best to be honest with Laban, so he exclaimed “Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force” [vs. 32]. The fundamental meaning of the verb *gazal* (‘take by force’) is to pluck off or to despoil. Certainly that was within the realm of possibility. “Rob not the poor” [Prov 22.22]. To show his earnestness, Jacob continues “In the presence of our kinsmen point out what I have that is yours and take it” [vs. 32]. That is to say, Jacob summons both his family members and those of Laban as witnesses who by this time must have gathered around each man. However, it was unknown to Jacob that Rachel had stolen her father’s gods (cf. vs. 32). At this point Jacob was pretty much at the mercy of Laban and this in the hill country of Gilead, so close to the safety of home.

Because Laban had the upper hand, he took it upon himself to search the tents first of Jacob (the prime suspect) followed by the tents of his two daughters, Leah and Rachel as well as their maid servants. After having search Leah’s tent—and this must have embarrassed her considerably, her own father invading her own space—Laban entered the tent of Rachel who must have felt the same embarrassment and outrage. “Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them in the camel’s saddle and sat upon them” [vs. 34]. Here the term *teraphym* is used again, not the gods or ‘*eloyah*’ (singular) claimed by Laban in vs. 30. Thus we have a rather humorous picture of Rachel sitting upon the saddle within the tent though not unusual because chances are she used it as a pillow. “And Laban felt all about the tent but did not find them” [vs. 34]. *Mashash* is the verb for “to feel” and connotes a groping about without the ability to see. “Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him” [27.12]. This *mashash* suggests that Laban knew the feel of his idols and immediately would recognize the small figures either of clay or metal. Rachel knew this as well and came up with a quick excuse: “for the way of women is upon me,” that is, Rachel claimed she was in her menstrual period. According to Lev 15.19-23 written later on, a woman was considered unclean: “And everything upon which she lies during her impurity shall be unclean” [vs. 20 of Leviticus]. Perhaps the Lord had this in mind when bidding Moses to record this and not without some irony. Rachel’s ploy was sufficient to ward off her father who continued his *mashash* but without luck.

“Then Jacob became angry and upbraided Laban” [vs. 36]. *Ryv* is the verb for “upbraided” and suggests both rebuke and strife. It was noted last in 26.22, “And he moved from there and dug another well, and over that they did not quarrel.” The source of this *ryv* lay in accusing Jacob who supposedly offended and sinned against Laban, the reason for him having “hotly pursued” him. The verb here is *dalaq*, to burn, flame. “They pursued us upon the mountains” [Lam 4.19]. Jacob continues taunting Laban, that he produce evidence of supposed deceit as well as the stolen gods. If Laban could do that, he had to set them out in the open for all to see and the two parties (‘kinsmen,’ vs. 37) were to decide. Admittedly that would be tough, each side being predisposed to follow its leader. Next Jacob recounts the fidelity given Laban, for many years faithfully he had watched over Laban’s flocks. It is to Laban’s credit that he listened patiently and did not intervene with some excuse for which he’s famous.

“If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed” [vs. 42]. Jacob calls as witness the God both of his father (Isaac) and the God of his grand-father, Abraham. In addition to acknowledging the monotheistic nature of God, Jacob adds the “Fear of Isaac” which belongs to his father. As a footnote to the **RSV** says, this expression “is an old epithet for the God of the fathers, appropriated as a title for Israel’s God.” *Pachad* is the noun and derives from the verb “to tremble.” “There is no fear of God before his eyes” [Ps 36.1.2]. The Hebrew for “on my side” reads literally “to me” (*ly*) thereby signifying direct relationship. Then Jacob presents Laban, the one seeking his idols, with his own experience of the God of Abraham and Isaac: “God saw my affliction and the labor of my hands and rebuked you last night” [vs. 42]. A different verb for “rebuked” is used here compared with the sense of *ryv* of vs. 36, *yakach*, last noted in 21.25: “When Abraham complained to Abimelech about a well of water.” As for the rebuke at hand, it consists of not saying “a word to Jacob, neither good or bad” [vs. 24] but to maintain a spirit of even-mindedness.

After this rather long rebuke of Laban for which Jacob deserves due credit, he must have felt fear of reprisal from Laban who now responds. After all, Laban’s two daughters and their respective children were not in his control. What he says shows the powerful effect of the Lord’s intervention in that dream not to speak ill of Jacob. However, Laban begins typically thinking of himself saying that the daughters, children and flocks with Jacob are his as well as “all that you see is mine” [vs. 43]. Right after this statement designed to put Jacob on guard Laban changes his position: “But what can I do this day to these my daughters or to their children whom they have born?” In other words, they have opted for Jacob, and Laban accepts this...but given his character, one isn’t certain until he’s left well behind. Laban accepts reality by proposing a covenant (*beryth*) between him and Jacob, the actual words being “cut a covenant” which is to be a witness between the two men or a *hed* between them. “These seven ewe lambs you will take from my hand, that you may be a witness for me that I dug this well” [21.30]. Yet another quote is made relevant to the uneasy alliance between Abraham King Abimelech which parallels the one at hand.

Jacob takes the initiative and “took a stone and set it up as a pillar” [vs. 45]. Surely he had in mind his experience long ago at Luz where he had his dream of the ladder extending between heaven and earth and angels descending and ascending upon it. There he took the pillow he had used and set it up as a pillar or *matsevah* (cf. 28.18-22) which signaled the change of names from Luz to Bethel or House of God. This *matsevah* stood in sharp contrast to Laban’s images or *teraphym* and must have awoken greater awareness in Laban as to the monotheistic God of Abraham. It thus served to turn his attention from these *teraphym* he so ardently sought after. Shortly after Jacob had used a single stone for a pillar—and we don’t know its size, great or small—he bade those with him to gather stones and make a heap by which the two parties sat down for a meal. *Gal* is word for “heap” and suggests something rolled up or away. “And they raised over him (Achan) a great heap of stones that remains to this day” [Jos 8.27]. So Jacob laid the foundation, as it were, after which his kinsmen finished the job. Laban, despite not being involved with the work at hand, was the first to name this heap, Jegar-sahadutha, an Aramaic term for The Heap of Witness. Next Jacob put a name to it, Galeed, The Heap of Witness. Laban seems to have concurred with the name of Galeed (much shorter) and like the proposed covenant with Jacob in vs. 44, agrees it to be a witness or *hed* (Gileed: *gal* or heap + *hed* or witness). In addition to Gileed or Heap of Witness either Jacob, Laban or both had constructed Mizpah, apparently a place-name as opposed to an inhabited city (NB: the English translation has ‘pillars’ in addition to Mizpah). This proper name means watch post, the reason for which is given in vs. 49: “The Lord watch between you and me when we are absent from the other.” The idea seems to be that the watch post will be out here in the wilderness, the hill country of Gilead, far from human habitation.

Still it was a sensitive area because people from Jacob's side could cross over undetected and visa versa. Thus Mizpah...the watch post...was to be manned by no one other than the Lord himself. He will be there "when we are absent" or not paying close eye on each other. This doesn't forebode well for either side even with the Lord standing in between them both. Laban, after all, is the one who insists on Mizpah and is yet another reflection of his suspicious nature. He continues with a threat that God will be a witness (*hed*) should Jacob take wives other than his daughters (cf. vs. 50), something that must have insulted Jacob though we don't hear of it.

Laban even has the temerity to claim responsibility for construction of the *gal* or heap of stones: "See this heap and the pillar which I have set between you and me" [vs. 51]. It is a border beyond which neither man will pass over to do harm or *rahaḥ* (connotes evil) not just physical damage. Finally Laban invokes "the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father" [vs. 53]. That is to say, he summons the God of Jacob's grandfather whom apparently he had worshiped while in Nahor, the land from which he left at God's call. After all, it was to Laban that Abraham's faithful, anonymous servant had come, he being the brother of Rebekah. Thus Laban's words were uttered not so much out of loyalty or submission to the God of Abraham but to the fact that Abraham procured a wife from his family. After all, Laban invocation is done tongue-in-cheek because don't forget...he had *teraphym* or images of divinities and didn't subscribe to the God of Abraham. All the while Jacob was listening patiently biding his time and wanting to get this meeting over and return home. "So Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac" [vs. 53; cf. vs. 42]. That means the swearing between Jacob and Laban included both Abraham and his son Isaac who, remarkably, was still alive.

The final gesture—and this was done at Jacob's initiative—was for him to offer a sacrifice on the mountain (cf. vs. 54); which one is unspecified and could be any in this hilly territory of Gilead. Jacob summoned his kinsmen to "eat bread" there even though a sacrifice involves an animal. Perhaps Jacob made a sacrifice not unlike Abraham of Isaac which at the very last minute was halted by divine intervention. Thus everyone ended up by eating bread (this term can refer to the eating of any food). Afterwards they stayed on the mountain, perhaps out of fear that Laban catch them off guard and make an assault. As for Laban and his party, both are conspicuously not mentioned as partaking of this sacrifice. Finally this prolonged drama comes to an end. "Early in the morning Laban arose and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them; then he departed and returned home" [vs. 55. NB: in the Hebrew text this verse is 32.1]. From the way Laban had comported himself since he came on the scene, he was an unsavory character though not outrightly evil. His grandchildren and two daughters (Leah and Rachel) dutifully received their father's kiss and despite being kin, were glad the saga was over and gladly followed Jacob home.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

The numbering of verses of this chapter differs from the Hebrew text, 31.55 being with 31.1; however, the enumeration of verses here follows the **RSV** text.

"Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him" [vs. 1]. That is, finally—and this after some twenty-six years—Jacob broke free of the long, oppressive influence of Laban. However, he had one last encounter that almost precluded his escape right at the border between the two men's respective countries amid the hills of Gilead. While making his way from there to Canaan he must have thought, "Was it worth all the effort to procure a bride?" Emphatically "no" on the human level but necessary to fulfil the divine intent manifested to the then-named Abram of first inhabiting and then taking over the land of Canaan. The sons or presumed heirs of Canaan have been born while Jacob was away for so long. Now he returns at their head, ready to take their rightful places as future princes. However, the



story of Joseph and exile into Egypt which will begin shortly stymies a definitive return, putting it on hold for many generations. We as readers of Genesis know this whereas Jacob does not. If he had known that his descendants were to spend some four hundred plus years away from Canaan, he may have considered the semi-bondage under Laban as a better option; perhaps he might have had a reconsideration of his plans. After all, Jacob spent a good part of his life in his grandfather's ancestral homeland, much preferable than Egypt which, it should be recalled, was good to Abram insofar as providing sustenance during a famine (cf. 12.10+).

When Jacob and Laban had cut their covenant, the latter called the pillars connected with the heap of witness Mizpah where the Lord acted as a watchman in the middle of the Gilead hill country, this being an isolated area. The same applied with Jacob's vision at Luz-turned-Bethel. To human eyes the desert appears vacant but to divine eyes, a place teeming with activity. Another sign of this activity was Jacob's encounter with "the angels of God" who had met or *pagah* him, a verb used in the just mentioned connection of Luz/Bethel which connotes a striking or rushing: "and he came to a certain place and stayed there that night." Thus this unspecified number of angels *pagah* Jacob...rushed upon him...almost immediately after he had left Laban, a welcoming home group, if you will. These angels had come from Bethel, newly descended from that ladder set up into heaven, and turned out to be larger than expected: "This is God's army" [vs. 2]! *Machaneh* is the noun for "army," the name Jacob gave to the place but altered more specifically to *Machanyim* (Mahanaim in the **RSV**) or "two armies." So Jacob surmised that Luz-turned-Bethel had been a military staging area more than a city. As for *machaneh*, also it means a camp. "He let them fall in the midst of their camp, all around their habitations" [Ps 78.28]. It should be noted that it is a man (Jacob) who is responsible for either changing the name of a place or giving a name to a previous unnamed place associated with angels, first as with Bethel and then with Mahanaim.

Now the text appears to change abruptly a second time early in a new chapter, as though the encounter with the angelic army were intended to encourage Jacob for what was to follow: "And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom" [vs. 3]. Actually the change isn't that radical because the word for "angel" and "messenger" is *mal'ak*; Jacob met the army of angels, named the place Two Armies and picked out several angel/messengers in advance. Chances are it was they who recommended this precaution. Esau continued his life in-the-wild for the same twenty-six years that Jacob had been absent, so he was a formidable force to contend with. Jacob knew just the right place to send the angels, Seir, which had been mentioned in 14.6 in conjunction with the kings who allied themselves against Abram. Jacob had no idea as to the location of his brother; certainly the angels knew, given their quasi-divine status. It was they who went out to Seir which had been unknown to Jacob.

Jacob gave instructions to the angels/messengers as follows: "I have sojourned with Laban and stayed until now" [vs. 4]. In other words, they are to speak in the first person singular (of Jacob), direct mouthpieces, not simply representatives. Mention of Laban is important for Esau, for at last it resolved the issue as to Jacob's location who earlier must have tried frantically to hunt him down. Then again, in later years Esau had realized that the location was well beyond his reach. *Gur* is the verb for "sojourn" and used last 26.3: "Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you." Obviously *gur* is akin to being in exile, albeit self-imposed and less than welcoming which doesn't mean one can be comfortable in that alien place. Thus by using the verb *gur*, Jacob hopes that his brother will have some pity upon him, that he had sojourned for many years yet was on the threshold of returning home. Next the angels are to speak of Jacob's bountiful possessions: oxen, asses, flocks, men servants and maid servants. If Esau may harbor any resentment toward his brother, mention of his wealth might do the trick and assuage him. Jacob puts this in terms of "favor" or *chen* (also as good-will) in the sight of

Esau.

“And the messengers returned to Jacob” [vs. 6]. The time between the previous verse and this one must have seemed an eternity to Jacob, even longer than his twenty-six year absence. Despite having angels as his messengers, one could never tell how Esau might respond (react seems more accurate). Despite their semi-divine status, they had to appear to Esau in the guise of human beings, perhaps just as formidable as Esau’s retinue must have been, in order to match it. To some degree this is reminiscent of Abram’s dealing with the visitors prior to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah who at one time are described as men and at another time as angels. The response from Esau had an ominous note about it: “We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him” [vs. 6]. We don’t know the size of the contingent Jacob had after he left Laban but can assume it was not like Esau’s which was tempered by living outdoors much of the time. And so Jacob, in addition to being afraid, was distressed or *yatsar*, a verb which connotes pressing or binding together, and an apt description of how Jacob felt at the moment, all wrapped up in fear. “Your steps shall not be straightened” [Prov 4.12].

This fear drove Jacob to take immediate action. He divided the people and various herds of animals “into two companies” [vs. 7], *machaneh* being the word for “company,” the same word used in vs. 2 (‘This is God’s army’) and related to the name Mahanaim. While *machaneh* has non-military connotations here, certainly each group must have armed itself just in case. “If Esau comes to the one company and destroys it, then the company which is left will escape” [vs. 8]: not a pleasant prospect but a precaution based upon past experience with Esau.

Between vs. 9 and 12 Jacob implores the Lord, possibly at the request of the angel/messengers. After all, he has his back up against the wall: it’s either Laban or Esau. Jacob invokes the Lord as the “God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac” [vs. 9]. He calls Abraham his father who, biologically speaking, is his grandfather. The point is that Jacob doesn’t care at this juncture; he’s more interested in obtaining guidance from the same God who helped his grandfather and father in their distress. If they came off well as they said they had done, the same might apply to him. However, there remained a nagging fear that his twenty-six year absence from home and his family might have turned God against him. Jacob decides to use God’s own words for his benefit, that is, when God had said “Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good.” The exact quote Jacob had in mind was “Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you” [31.3]. Perhaps Jacob deliberately altered the words “I will be with you” to “I will do you good,” the latter reading literally, “I will do good with you.” Also the original, if you will, contains “your fathers” which in the current request isn’t necessary because Jacob is invoking the God of his “two fathers,” Abraham and Isaac.

Next Jacob states his humility with “I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness which you have shown to your servant” [vs. 10]. *Qatan* is the verb for “not worthy” (only three other biblical uses) and applies to something small. One such verse is Amos 8.5: “that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great.” Jacob claims himself to be small in light of divine “steadfast love” or *chesed*, that close to untranslatable word which here is plural and used in 24.12: “I pray you, and show steadfast love to my master Abraham.” Jacob couples *chesed* (again in the plural, possibly for effect) with “faithfulness” or *emeth*. “Now then, if you will deal loyally and truly with my master” [24.49]. In the verse at hand Jacob claims that “with only my staff I crossed this Jordan” [vs. 10]. The word for “staff” is *maqel*, alternately as a twig or sucker, a term found in Chapter Thirty-One where Jacob uses rods with regard to the sheep entrusted to him by Laban. This claim to poverty contradicts such references to his wealth as in 31.17-18 and is to be taken with some self-serving.

Now Jacob gets right down to business with the Lord: “Deliver me, I pray you, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him” [vs. 11]. *Natsal* is the verb for “deliver” and connotes a sense of pulling, of snatching. “Deliver my soul from the sword, my life from the power of the dog” [Ps 22.21]! Actually *natsal* was used earlier in 31.16: “all the property which God has taken away from our father belongs to us and our children.” Jacob utters these words without having had any direct contact with Esau for the twenty-six years since he left his father Isaac, that is, after having cheated Isaac from bestowing the birthright upon Esau. Certainly the two must have kept an eye on each other over the years through spies or by word of mouth. That seemed to have re-enforced fear of his brother, not mitigate it. As for Esau, we have no inkling of what he felt which means that Jacob never got any accurate information about his disposition. To remind God of his favor toward him, Jacob ends his prayer with a second reminder, the first being in vs. 9: “But you said, ‘I will do you good and make your descendants as the sand of the sea which cannot be numbered for multitude’” [vs. 12]. Jacob is referring to 28.14: “and your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south.” Of course, that promise was made at soon-to-be-named Bethel or at the threshold of Jacob’s prolonged service under Laban. It was wise for him to remind God of that promise as well as that place so long ago in order to stir up divine assistance which he needs now more than ever.

At the conclusion of his prayer, Jacob “lodged there that night” [vs. 13], that is at Mahanaim or the place where he had exclaimed “This is God’s army” [vs. 2]! The verb *lon* for “lodged” is used (it connotes a tarrying as well as dwelling), the same one as in 28.11 when Jacob was about to have his dream of the angels on the ladder. Surely he had recollections of that long-ago dream which was to find echo in one he is about to have. Beforehand Jacob decided upon a present or *minchah* from what he had in his possession, that is, from one of the two parties he had made for safety. *Minchah* was noted last in the offering of both Cain and Abel: “In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground” [4.3; also cf. vs. 4]. And so the present Jacob had in mind was a kind of offering—an appeasement—to Esau consisting of various animals in his possession. If what is recounted of these animals in vss. 14-15 appears impressive, it gives an idea of the sizeable other half left to Jacob after he split his fortune into two. Then again, Jacob went over-board in his desire (and fear) to impress his brother.

The next step was to entrust “every drove by itself” [vs. 16] among his servants, a further way of breaking up into smaller, more difficult to track groups, among that one half in Jacob’s possession. As for the other half, presumably it was removed some distance from Jacob but not terribly so, just in case it had to rush back in an emergency. That group Jacob did not divide up into small components but remained as a formidable reserve. With regard to the half that stayed with Jacob, in between each drove was to be a “space” or *rewach*, a word closely akin to *ruach* (wind, spirit). One other biblical reference of this word exists, Est 4.14: “If you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s house will perish.” As for the verse at hand, the idea can be taken of an interval as a “breath” separating each group of animals, the breath each breathed forth as they moved along. As for the first group...the point-group...Jacob entrusts a servant with words to communicate to Esau should they cross paths. Perhaps Esau had gotten wind of Jacob being in the hill country of Gilead. Who wouldn’t, with such a large group of people (let alone Laban’s retinue) in a deserted place? This may have roused Esau’s curiosity further as to the identity of these people. Jacob may have entertained similar thoughts, that his movements from the Gilead region home to Canaan would not go undetected. The servant in the lead was instructed to say that the possessions in hand “belong to your servant Jacob; they are a present sent to my Lord Esau” [vs. 18]. Even the word “meets” which Jacob says when speaking with this servant is revealing of his fear: *pagash* which means to rush upon, attack. “I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs”

[Hos 13.8].

Vs. 18 just quoted above ends with the telling words, “and moreover, he is behind us.” That would allow sufficient time to gauge the reaction of Esau not so much to the gifts but to the news that Jacob is close at hand. All in all, Jacob sent forth three droves, each instructed with the words “You shall say the same thing to Esau when you meet him” [vs. 19]. Each was to say the same as the first group, “Moreover, your servant Jacob is behind us.” These words differ from vs. 18 by including “your servant Jacob” intending that the further Esau gets back with regard to the retinue, the closer he comes to Jacob. Jacob’s reckoning was that the further behind, the safer he will be. All this carefully planned strategy was to appease Esau with the present after which Jacob will “see his face” [vs. 20]. The verb for “appease” is *kaphar* (literally, to cover) and often applies to the making of atonement. For another related sense, cf. Ps 78.38: “Yet he, being compassionate, forgave their iniquity and did not destroy them.” So what Jacob brings to Esau are more than gifts; they are “atonements” for twenty-six years of estrangement instigated largely by Jacob and his mother. As for Rebekah, the next we hear of her is her death towards the end of Genesis in 49.31; nothing else is recorded of her. Surely Jacob must have been anxious about his mother, whether or not Esau had treated her well or even had her done away with. The words “see his face” are telling, too, because Jacob could determine immediately from past experience whether Esau would react favorably or not. So the three droves arranged themselves consecutively, one after the other in a long line, and made their way toward Esau. The precise point of meeting isn’t given yet—that depends upon the incident Jacob has that night with the angel—and turns out to be in his favor. But before that happened, the three droves passed before Jacob as armies before a general. The idea of having them strung out was deliberate, that is, making the droves more vulnerable. If they were grouped together, they could appear threatening as an army. Now the stage was set for meeting Esau. However, a most important event had to take place before that intimated by the concluding words of vs. 21, “and he himself lodged that night in the camp.” Note that in “the same night” Jacob rose in total darkness and moved these people across the Jabbok (a tributary of the Jordan River), no small feat given how small children would react not just in the darkness but making their way across a river.

Vs. 23 describes this mini-exodus further by adding “everything that he had.” Once this had been completed successfully, vs. 24 says dramatically yet simply, “And Jacob was left alone.” Immediately after the arduous task of sending men, woman and children across the Jabbok, Jacob had no time to rest: “and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.” *Avaq* is the verb for “wrestled” whose verbal root means “to pound, make small” from which is derived *avaq* or dust. The only other biblical reference is in the next verse, 25. The obvious image that comes to mind is the dust raised by two persons wrestling on the ground. Also *avaq* connotes not so much deadliness but an earnest competition, all the more mysterious since it took place in darkness and lasted until daybreak. That may have not lasted too long, however, for earlier that night—and we have no specific details—Jacob had sent his two wives, children and others across the Jabbok. “When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob” [vs. 25]: words echoing Jacob’s strength demonstrated at the well with the shepherds (cf. 29.10). *Yakal* is the verb for “prevail” as noted in 30.8: “With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister hand have prevailed; so she called his name Naphtali.” Interestingly, we have a not dissimilar situation where the verb for “wrestled” is *patal* (to be twisted; has just four other biblical references). Thus *avaq* describes the intensity of the wrestling whereas *patal*, its form though in two very different circumstances. So when this unknown being—we cannot determine with accuracy whether he was a man or angel—could not get the better of Jacob, “he touched the hollow of his thigh” which put his thigh out of joint. *Nagah* is the verb for “touched” which also means to smite: “For all the day long I have been stricken and chastened every morning” [Ps 73.14]. This verb was also used in 20.6: “Therefore I did not let you touch her.” As for “hollow,” the Hebrew is *kaph* which can refer to the hollow of a hand, so touching...striking...this part of Jacob’s thigh caused a sprain. The unknown



wrestler did not prevail (*yakal*) nor did Jacob; the match turned out to be a draw.

“Let me go, for the day is breaking” [vs. 26]. The association of this being with night and daybreak intensifies the mystery of his identity even further. Never do we learn his name which makes the character of Jacob all the more powerful. Even though the first beams of daylight are on the horizon and Jacob’s thigh has become strained, he threatens to keep on wrestling his mysterious partner: “I will not let you go unless you bless me” [vs. 26]. A wise ploy on Jacob’s part, for if the wrestler had been some kind of demon or god of the night, he would have been repelled at the notion of a blessing (*barak*, the verb noted several times earlier). Without responding—and while still wrestling—the man replied “What is your name?” to which Jacob identified himself. That gave occasion for the wrestler to say “Your name shall no more be called Jacob but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed” [vs. 28]. Chances are this man knew Jacob’s name beforehand but wanted him to utter it so that his new name of Israel might be that more significant, a name which means “He who strives with God” (a footnote to the **RSV** gives the alternate, ‘God strives’). The verb for “strives” is *sarah* with the sense of placing in a row or ordering; from it derives a common noun *sarah* (princess; *sar* or ‘prince’ does not; from *sarar*, to hold dominion). As for the verb, the only other biblical verse is one which pertains to Jacob, Hos 12.3: “He strove with the angel and prevailed; he wept and sought his favor.”

This striving or *sarah* of which the wrestler speaks says it is with God himself as well as with men, a *sarah* in which Jacob prevails, *yakal*. Though the wrestling match which lasted until daybreak appears to be a draw, the man claims Jacob as victor. That is, he had hitherto unheard of power strive with God as well as men, something that forebodes well for the morrow when he meets Esau. It should be noted, however, that to strive necessarily doesn’t mean victory but indicates the determination Jacob who gave his all. Finally, Jacob asks the wrestler his name to which the question comes, “Why is that you ask my name” [vs. 29]? Without further ado, the wrestler blesses Jacob as requested in vs. 26. Finally the day breaks before which the wrestler had vanished. Upon reflection, Jacob may have thought this man an angel, having encountered not just one but a multitude at Luz-turned-Bethel prior to his service with Laban. Still, Jacob had in mind the wrestler’s words “have striven with God and with men” which makes him name the place of this encounter at the Jabbok Peniel, the Face of God: “for I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved” [vs. 30]. “Have seen” is not quite accurate, for the wrestling match had taken place at night amid all that “dust” (*avaq*) kicked up, certainly unfavorable conditions for catching a glimpse at someone’s face. Not only that, they were in constant motion. However, this glimpse at the divine face which Jacob claimed to have seen is the first face-to-face encounter between God and man since before the flood when the Lord walked with Noah. Previous encounters had been in the form of visions or dreams, not the one-on-one encounter described here, all the more dramatic by reason of having taken within the context of a wrestling match. The next face-to-face encounter won’t be until Ex 24.11 or Moses and the elders on Mount Sinai: “they beheld God and ate and drank.” However, the verb there is *chazah* which applies more to a beholding, a taking in of the whole, compared with the direct verb of the verse at hand, *ra’ah*.

Vs. 30 concludes with “yet my life is preserved” or *natsal* which was noted in vs. 11 above (‘Deliver me, I pray you, from the hand of my brother’). Perhaps Jacob had in mind those words addressed to God and stated here shortly before encountering Esau. After having made this statement which surely he must have communicated to Leah, Rachel and some of the others whom he sent across the Jabbok. At least that would explain his limping from that injured thigh. The image of Jacob passing Peniel (Face of God) as the sun was rising upon him (cf. vs. 31) was a sign of sorts that indeed Jacob had prevailed over both God and men and set himself forward to the encounter he had been dreading for so many years.

Chapter Thirty-Two concludes with a statement about Jacob's sprained thigh, the reason why Israelites do not eat "the sinew of the hip," a command which does not seem to have a specific reference. In many ways this requires no command, for it refers to the very source of the name of Israel, He Who Strives with God.

### Chapter Thirty-Three

"And Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked and behold, Esau was coming and four hundred men with him" [vs. 1]. Several references to this lifting up of eyes had been noted already, the references being 13.14, 18.2, 22.4 & 23 and 24.63. While they don't occur terribly often, their appearance reveals the state of mind of the persons involved, that they are preoccupied with something. In the case at hand, Jacob just came off the most unusual wrestling bout in history, not knowing exactly what to make of it except that he had to follow through on what had been communicated to him. And that communication involved a change of name. Note that later on God appeared to Jacob saying that his name will be Israel, not Jacob (cf. 35.10). However, the two names are used interchangeably for the rest of Genesis. With this change of names the land of Canaan is destined to be called by the descendants of Abraham whose foothold there had been tentative for several generations.

The gesture by Jacob is threefold: first he lifts up his eyes and looks (the common verb *ra'ah*) which is followed by behold (*hineh* signifies astonishment). It seems to occur almost immediately after Jacob's wrestling match as he limps away from the newly named Peniel onward to meet Esau. Jacob knew this encounter was to happen, the reason why he had sent his family to safety across the Jabbok. Leah, Rachel and the children must have wondered about Jacob's injury but no time to explain it now. He had seen Esau off in the distance, easy due to the sand kicked up by four hundred men in his company. Now was the time to divide everyone into two groups with the maids and their children in front. As for the three droves of animals prepared by gifts, we have no account of them having crossed the Jabbok with Jacob and his family. Presumably they took a different route with a pre-arranged place and time to meet. Once Jacob's family and attendants were hastily put in order, "he himself went on before them" [vs. 3]. No hesitation here. Jacob had gained a confidence not experienced before his wrestling match. Nevertheless, Jacob went through the customary acts of humble welcoming by "bowing himself to the ground seven times until he came near to his brother." The verb *shachah* is used for "bowing," and has religious as well as social applications. It was last noted in 24.52: "When Abraham's servant heard their words, he bowed himself to the earth before the Lord." Jacob must have arranged his family quickly—chances are they had practiced this dreaded encounter numerous times—so without further ado he was able to approach Esau alone giving homage. While we get the impression that Jacob prostrated himself on the ground, got up and repeated this constantly, in part he did this out of nervousness and a way to relieve it. Obviously Esau was curious about the two groups (the family and the three droves) out in the wilderness, his home territory if you will, and ran ahead as quickly as possible.

"But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept" [vs. 4]. During his running, Esau probably didn't quite know if it was his brother. However, once both men saw each other, Esau took the initiative of embracing Jacob, *chavaq* being the verb which also means to fold one's hands (in idleness). "His right hand does embrace me" [Sg 2.6]. Next Esau fell on his neck, a sign of both relief and gladness, followed by a kiss or *nashaq*, a verb fundamentally meaning to dispose to, arrange and put in order. Ironically this verb had been used back in 27.27 when Jacob "came near and kissed him (his blind father Isaac)," that is, in the guise of Esau to steal his blessing. Esau ran toward Jacob silently which must have unnerved Jacob, despite the short distance between them now. Then relief came with an embrace—still Esau may have feigned brotherly love and had a

dagger in hand—yet did not feel relieved until the kiss which brought back traitorous memories. Still, both men had cause for weeping and weeping profusely. Though we have been following the saga of Jacob, not that of Esau, it is to the latter that credit belongs for having demonstrated straight-forward, unfeigned brotherly love. While Esau may have been hot-headed as was the case twenty-six years earlier, his experience of being out in the wilderness tempered his wild disposition, perhaps more than Jacob's.

At the beginning of this chapter several references were made to lifting up one's eyes and then seeing. Now comes another: "And when Esau raised his eyes and saw the women and children" [vs. 5]. Jacob responds that God had given them to him "your servant" or one in service to (*heved*: can apply to a slave) Esau, a way of demonstrating publically his humility. Just as Jacob had approached his brother with multiple acts of bowing, now came to Esau the maids and their children followed by Leah and Rachel who was accompanied by Joseph, the favorite son who soon is to dominate the rest of Genesis. This experience of awe and the potential of being either enslaved or put to the sword must have impressed Joseph greatly. He saw in Esau, an unlikely person, someone who was merciful, perhaps more so than his father Jacob. That experience stuck with Joseph and influenced his relationship with his brothers who had betrayed them. "What do you mean by all this company which I met" [vs. 8]? An expression of amazement at Jacob's family and maids. The verb *pagash* is used as was the case in 32.19 ('You shall say the same thing to Esau when you meet him') only here the meeting is one that overwhelmed Esau favorably. Then again, always he was suspicious of his brother who outwitted him and deep down was not surprised. So there was Esau pretty much put on the spot by all these women and children. If their pleading eyes didn't move him, nothing would. Things might have turned out very differently if Jacob were alone or with a smaller contingent.

Jacob comes right out and answers his brother's question as to such a multitude: "To find favor in the sight of my lord" [vs. 8]. *Chen* is the word for "favor" as used in 32.5 with reference to the gifts sent along separately from the women and children. So that means Esau ended up with a double *chen* which overwhelmed him. Esau responded by saying that he had sufficient possessions; it isn't clear whether he was referring to those with Jacob or the three droves he entrusted to servants as gift offerings. Chances are it was the latter which encountered Esau before Jacob ran into him. Nevertheless, Jacob insisted that his brother "accept my present from my hand" [vs. 10]. In the same verse Jacob comes off with a piece of flattery that clinched the relationship between the two brothers: "for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God, with such favor have you received me." Esau knew what Jacob was referring to in a general sort of way, that is, through the obeisance and generous offerings. However, Jacob feigned humility to some degree and wanted to make a good impression on his powerful brother that would preclude any foul play. Yet in many ways Jacob is correct. Esau did receive with favor (*ratsah*) his brother who had cheated him of his birthright. One gets the impression from the narrative—taken obviously from the side of Jacob—that he would have acted differently if in Esau's position. As for the verb *ratsah*, another reference showing its fundamental meaning of taking delight is Prov 3.12: "For the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights."

Jacob continues to insist that Esau receive the gifts brought to him: "Thus he urged him, and he took it." Finally Esau relented in the face of Jacob's urging or *patsar* ('The angels urged Lot,' 19.15). Once this transaction finally had been completed—much to the relief of both brothers—Esau said "Let us journey on our way, and I will go before you" [vs.12]. The place which Esau had suggested isn't given but presumed (cf. vs. 14, Seir in Edom), that is, his home. In addition to the two journeying there, Esau's troop of some four hundred men (cf. vs. 1) must have accompanied them along with the gifts Jacob had presented. Certainly that made up quite a large contingent of men, women, slaves and

various types of animals. However, Jacob besought Esau due to the burden of children and flocks “giving suck” which “are a care to me” [vs. 13]. The Hebrew text lacks the noun “care” and has in its stead “on me” (*halay*). Jacob says with regard to the flocks, “If they are over-driven for one day, all the flocks will die.” The verb for “over-driven” is *daphaq* whose fundamental meaning is “to knock” with two other biblical references, one of which is Sg 5.2: “Hark! My beloved is knocking.” While true, Jacob was fearful that once in Edom, he and his retinue would be firmly in the power of Esau...in other words, no escape. Jacob elaborates in vs. 14: “Let my lord pass on before his servant, and I will lead on slowly.” Here is yet another example throughout this dialogue of a formal title (lord or *adony*) with respect to “servant,” a way of speaking Jacob uses deliberately both to curry favor and show that he is no threat to his brother. The verb for “will lead slowly” is *la’at* or to wrap around in the sense of to muffle. “And the people stole into the city that day as people steal in who are ashamed when they flee in battle” [2Sam 19.3]. The *la’at* Jacob had in mind, however, had another meaning hidden from Esau. Jacob wished to *la’at*—walk softly past Esau—and thus make good his escape along with his retinue. Now the agreed upon destination is clear, Seir of Edom.

A problem quickly developed for Jacob when Esau responded, “Let me leave with you some of the men who are with me”...some of the four hundred who comprised Esau’s bodyguard. That was the last thing Jacob wanted to hear. Quickly he responded, “What need is there? Let me find favor in the sight of my lord [vs. 15].” Jacob had many years experience dealing with Laban who tricked him at virtually every turn, so he uttered these words without betraying his intent. Jacob appeals to that *chen* or favor mentioned in vs. 8, a way of saying to Esau something like, “Trust me that I will meet you in Seir.” Surprisingly, Esau consented and let Jacob go. You’d think that having been robbed of his birthright Esau wouldn’t have trusted his brother. Yet it demonstrates again his openness which may be tinged with some naivete.

So instead of heading for Seir, Jacob “journeyed to Succoth and built himself a house and made booths for his cattle” [vs. 17]. That is to say, Jacob headed east of the Jordan River to in the plain north of the Jabbock. He had to do this with some stealth despite the large number of people and animals in his care. However, that was difficult; Jacob must have waited a while, perhaps until the cover of nightfall, before setting out. Once in Succoth, Jacob constructed a house...not a tent...compared with the booths (from which Succoth derives its name) for everyone else, which implies the relative comfort he lived compared with everyone else. As for a *sakah* or booth, it refers to a shelter less permanent than a tent, something made from branches and leaves. “You shall dwell in booths seven days; all who are Israelites born shall dwell in booths” [Lev 23.42]. However, Jacob did not remain in Succoth despite having settled down there. “And Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem which is in the land of Canaan...and he camped before the city” [vs. 18]. The adverb for “safely” is *shalem*, derived from *shalom* or peace; besides, *shalem* is a kind of play of words on Shechem. This place was mentioned in 12.6 in conjunction with the oak of Moreh, the place where Abram first built an altar upon arriving in the land of Canaan. It was natural for Jacob to head for Shechem, this ancestral place, valued for its symbolism of being the first real place of settlement in a foreign land by his grandfather. As for Esau, we don’t hear about him—and this for the last time—in 35.29 when he and Jacob buries their father, Isaac.

Note that Jacob did not enter the city of Shechem but camped before it. He had been absent from Canaan twenty-six years and was afraid that the inhabitants wouldn’t recognize him. Besides, even if they did, they would be forced to provide for a large contingent of women, children, slaves and herds. The sight of so many huts made of brush and the like must have shocked them, a sign of their poverty, perhaps a way of gaining sympathy from the Shechemites. This vicinity was to be Jacob’s home until 35.1 when God bade him to dwell in Bethel. In the meantime, Jacob bought that land on which he



pitched his tent from the father after whom Shechem was named, that is, outside the city itself. “There he erected an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel” [vs. 19] or God, the God of Israel. Note that Abram had erected an altar in Shechem earlier “to the Lord who had appeared to him” 12.7]. That earlier altar may have been in place occasionally used by Isaac and his family. Because it was the first one erected in Canaan, it was natural for Jacob to build one near it, not to supplant it, but close by and more modest out of respect for Abram. The name he bestowed upon it came in large part from that mysterious midnight wrestler who changed his name to Israel and represents a genuine take-over, albeit only in part, of the land of Canaan and foreshadows its renaming by the tribe of Abram.

### Chapter Thirty-Four

As this chapter develops, we see that things didn’t turn out well for Jacob in Shechem; actually his experience there was worse than those years of service to Laban, having left him and his clan in a precarious position among the Canaanites. As for the time spent in Shechem, no clear duration is given. Perhaps not mentioning this is deliberate, wishing to pass over it as quickly as possible and conclude the Jacob saga so that we may get to the important story of Joseph which heralds a completely new development rooted in Abram’s call to leave his homeland. Important as the creation account and what followed it, in many ways it is a kind of introduction to Abram (Abraham) and Joseph, whose story concludes the Book of Genesis.

“Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the women of the land” [vs. 1]. This verse starts off a new chapter innocently enough with Dinah (daughter of Leah), but that is to change almost at once. Just the fact that Dinah “went out” or left the camp—presumably still consisting of booths before Shechem—implies she entered the city on her own, unheard of by a woman of that time. The word for “visit” is *ra’ah* or to see: “to see the women of the land” which can mean anything from simple observation to interaction with them. Almost as soon as Dinah entered the city, “Shechem, the son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land, saw her” [vs. 2]. This is the same person after whom the city is named as well as the son of Hamor from whom Jacob had purchased “the piece of land on which he had pitched his tent” [33.19]. Being a notable person after whom the city is named, Shechem and most likely successor to his father’s throne, he had freer dealings with Jacob and his retinue than his subjects. That means he knew who went in and out of the city, especially a solitary woman which caught his attention. Once Shechem saw Dinah, he, as vs. 2 continues, “seized her and lay with her and humbled her.” In other words, he raped her forcefully. The verb *hanah* for “humbled” has various shades of meaning, a fact mentioned elsewhere in this document. “The enemy shall not outwit him, the wicked shall not humble him” [Ps 89.22]. Actually the seizing and laying takes place simultaneously with Shechem humbling (*hanah*) Dinah. Also it can refer to the abuse she was forced to endure after her rape.

The three-fold mistreatment of Dinah by Shechem seems to contrast with the verse at hand: “And his soul was drawn to Dinah, the daughter of Jacob” [vs. 3]. Apparently Shechem allowed Dinah to return to the encampment of booths outside the city. Usually the drawing at hand occurs before seduction; however, it follows Dinah’s humiliation and the continued attraction of Shechem for her. *Davaq* is the verb for “drawn” which means “to cling to” and is used to describe the attraction between man and woman: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh” [2.24]. Use of the word *nephesh* or “soul” intensifies the sense of *davaq*, that a word with vivid, material connotations should apply to something which is immaterial. Such intense longing forced Shechem to “speak (spoke) tenderly to her” which reads literally in Hebrew, “he spoke on the heart of the maiden.” That means Shechem attempted to find the right words to make Dinah consent to being his mistress or play-thing, figuring that she was a foreigner or daughter of some long-lost migrant

whose clan had designs on taking over the land. He was right as far that was concerned, Abraham and his descendants.

Not only did Shechem attempt to woo Dinah, he appealed to his father Hamor, “Get me this maiden for my wife” [vs. 4]. Note *yaldah*, the word for “maiden,” compared with *naharah* used in the previous verse. The former is derived from the verb *yalad* (to bring forth, give birth) and suggests a closer tie with the family or possessors of the maiden involved whereas the latter refers to someone who is young. It seems that a *naharah* could be a *yaldah*, not so much the other way around. In the case at hand, Shechem uses in direct speech to his father the noun *naharah*, probably a way to assuage him and not upset relations with Jacob camped outside the city. If Shechem had used the word *yaldah*, that would have aroused a red flag and the possibility of conflict with Jacob...which unfortunately happened a bit later.

“Now Jacob heard that he had defiled his daughter Dinah” [vs. 5]. Word got out quickly about Dinah having been abused by Shechem by reason of having entered the city alone, an easy target. Some of the women with whom Dinah met—for that was her original intent—got word back not so much to Jacob himself but to either Leah or Rachel, most likely the former who was Dinah’s mother. In addition to Jacob being enraged, he was angry at Dinah for having left without permission. Weak-eyed Leah could be excused for many things but certainly not for this gross negligence. *Tame*’ is the verb for “defiled” meaning to be polluted and often refers to pollution of a ritual variety often found with various shades of meaning in the Book of Leviticus. “Then the priest shall pronounce him unclean” [Lev 13.8]. Jacob got wind of Dinah’s defilement alone, that is, while “his sons were with his cattle in the field.” That means word reached him while alone either early in the morning or after the midday siesta or rest during the hottest time of day. Jacob managed to restrain himself but with difficulty. This inner struggle is revealed through use of the verb *charash* (‘held his peace’) which was noted regarding 24.21: “The man gazed at her in silence to learn whether the Lord had prospered his journey or not.” So *charash* implies an inner silence maintained with struggle but a struggle that pays dividends if kept. Thus Jacob maintained *charash* until evening or when his sons returned home from the field instead of running out to tell them or having those who informed him do the task. That would have created an even worse crisis for which Jacob would not have been prepared.

“And Hamor the father of Shechem went out to Jacob to speak with him” [vs. 6]. That means Shechem hid behind his father’s authority, afraid to confront Jacob about his rape of Dinah. Nevertheless, he was with him according to vs. 12. A real danger existed that Jacob might have slain him on the spot and thus start a feud between the two peoples; Jacob’s family was in a weaker position outside the city walls dwelling in booths and couldn’t afford that. As for Hamor from whose sons Jacob had purchased land for his tent, he didn’t want trouble as well, just to allow these strangers continue on their journey. So after probably rebuking his son for such carelessness, Hamor agreed to meet Jacob. By that time Jacob’s sons had come in from the field and “were indignant and very angry because he had wrought folly in Israel by laying with Jacob’s daughter, for such a thing ought not to be done” [vs. 7]. Jacob’s attitude isn’t revealed, only those of his sons: indignant and very angry or *hatsav* and *charah*. The former was noted in 6.6: “and it grieved him (the Lord) to his heart” and the latter in 4.5: “So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.” Both resulted from Shechem’s folly or *nevalah*; from the verbal root *navel* meaning “to become withered, faded” which colors the meaning of folly as in this instance as a losing of courage and respect...not all at once by gradually over time. “Nabal is his name, and folly is with him” [1Sam 35.35]. Here the proper name and “folly” derive from the same verbal root. Note that Israel is mentioned for the second time, the name given to Jacob by that mysterious wrestler at the river Jabbock. And so for the first time we have a shift—a gradual one also significant—from the person Jacob/Israel to the corporate identity of him and his retinue which could be applied to those

family members in Canaan from whom he had been absent twenty-six years.

The beginning of vs. 8 begins with “But Hamor spoke with them,” that is, Jacob and his eleven sons, on behalf of his son whose “soul longs for your daughter; I pray you, give her to him in marriage.” Words couched in the best diplomatic terms Hamor could muster which continue in the next few verses where he proposes inter-marriage between the two groups. However, Hamor made a fatal mistake by mentioning Schehem’s “soul” or *nephesh* which “was drawn to Dinah” [vs. 3] which reveals the intensity of his misdirected desire toward Jacob’s only daughter. The soul of Schehem “longs” for Dinah or *chashaq*, a verb which connotes a cleaving, almost sticking, action. “Because he cleaves to me in love I will deliver him” [Ps 91.14]. Hamor continues in vs. 10 with a proposal for Jacob and his entourage to “dwell with us” and that the “land shall be open to you; dwell and trade in it and get property in it.” Now Shechem himself breaks in with words directed to both Jacob and his sons, “whatever you say to me I will give” [vs. 11]. He was so desperate for Dinah (who was back in one of those booths watching this nervously from a distance) to be his bride that he was willing to do anything.

It is to the credit of Jacob and his sons that they kept their cool yet signs of future action are indicated by the words “The sons of Jacob answered Shechem and his father Hamor deceitfully” [vs. 13]. The noun *mirmah* is used here for the adverb (literally, ‘in deceit’) which connotes fraud. “Neither was there any deceit in his mouth” [Is 53.9]. The fact that all were speaking “in deceit” reveals that already they had planned vengeance against both Hamor and his son, Shechem. But instead of making their plan known—that would spoil the element of surprise—Jacob and his eleven sons made a counter-proposal: “We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a disgrace to us” [vs. 14]. The practice of circumcision goes back to the covenant the Lord made with Abraham in Chapter Seventeen, and the question at hand is more specific in vs. 14 of that chapter: “Any uncircumcised male...shall be cut off from his people; for he has broken my covenant.” Chances are Hamor and Shechem had gotten wind of this practice from Abraham’s descendants living in Canaan, so it wasn’t unfamiliar to them. Instead of allowing this “disgrace” (*cherphah*: noted with regard to 30.23) to stand between Jacob’s clan and the Shechemites, they agreed to the proposed condition or *’oth*, a verb used three times in this verse but with one other biblical use: “So the priests agreed that they should take no more money from the people” [2Kg 12.8]. Should the the people consent, then Dinah could become the wife of Hamor’s son.

“Their words pleased Hamor and Hamor’s son Shechem [vs. 18]. This verse reads literally, “And went well their words in the eyes of Hamor and in the eyes of Shechem, son of Hamor.” That is to say, what was proposed in the form of words became visual, and that caused the proposal of circumcision to be agreeable. Despite the pain involved, “the young man (Shechem) did not delay to do the thing because he had delight in Jacob’s daughter” [vs. 19]. *Chaphets* in the verb for “delight” which connotes an inclination and is used more often in more acceptable circumstances such as Ps 18.19: “He delivered me because he delighted in me.” The verse at hand continues with another sentence: “Now he was the most honored of all his family” which meant Shechem had influence with the men of the city with whom he spoke to persuade them. Towards the end of his little speech, Shechem made his own proposal borne of deceit: “Will not their cattle, their property and all their beasts be ours” [vs. 23]? That trick worked, and the men went outside the city walls to be circumcised. They left the safety of their walled town for the open space in which Jacob’s retinue were camped in booths. Some must have had misgivings once they saw up close the poor living conditions but were compelled to go along with Shechem and his father.

Vs. 25 begins with “On the third day when they were sore” or when the Shechemites were recovering

from their circumcision. Jacob and his sons waited for an interval of two full days before they implemented their *mirmah* or deceit mentioned in vs. 13. They didn't wish to take action all at once but wait until the Sechemites were at their most vulnerable. Not all Jacob's sons or other members of his group sprang into action, just Simeon and Levi, who sneaked into the city "and killed all the males" [vs. 25]. Two men were all that was required to carry out this *mirmah*—no more—simply by reason of them still "being sore" or in pain (*ka'av*). "But I am afflicted and in pain; let your salvation, O God, set me on high" [Ps 69.29]! As for Levi, later on when the Israelites had made a golden calf and worshiped it, Moses dispatched that tribe to slay them (cf. Ex 32.28). Surely the Levites must have recalled the incident at hand and made it a part of their heritage. Later when Jacob was on his deathbed he said of Simeon and Levi, "(They) are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords...Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel" [49.5 & 6]. As for these two brothers, not only did they slay the Shechemites, they got Hamor and his son as well after which they set Dinah free. Finally, the "sons of Jacob came upon the plain and plundered the city" [vs. 27] which means they took away the women, children and flocks as prey, the same verb for "plunder," *bazaz*.

Apparently Simeon and Levi acted on their own, not following orders from their father, Jacob, who rebuked them. "You have brought trouble on me by making me odious to the inhabitants of the land" [vs. 30]. *Hakar* is the verb for "have brought trouble" which alternately means "to disturb." "My father has troubled the land" [1Sam 14.29]. As for "odious," the verb is *ba'ash*, literally, "to stink." "He has made himself utterly abhorred by his people Israel" [1sam 27.12]. Thus the stench...the *ba'ash*...rose from Shechem and spread throughout Canaan. However, to those of Jacob's clan who resided there, this *ba'ash* was as a sweet-smelling fragrance. But as for Jacob and his immediate concern, rebuking Simeon and Levi weren't enough; he had to get away from Shechem as far and quickly as possible before other found him. Eventually that happened though we have no record of it. Those who came upon the slain Shechemites knew Jacob had caused the massacre by reason of the freshly circumcised corpses. So despite some faltering by Jacob, his sons responded boldly with "Should he (Shechem) treat our sister as a harlot" [vs. 31]?

### Chapter Thirty-Five

Word made its way back to Esau as to what Jacob had done to Shechem and its inhabitants, for given Esau's preference for dwelling outdoors, either he or one of his companions must have found out rather quickly and was horrified at the violence his brother had unleashed. It must have upset Jacob as well, for he just came off an unexpectedly pleasant reunion with his brother which now could be in jeopardy. As noted toward the beginning of the last chapter, no specific length of time is given for Jacob residing in the vicinity of Shechem; presumably it was short as intimated by the story about Dinah. After all, Chapter Thirty-Four was devoted in its entirety to her plight; she passes off the scene not to be heard of again though presumably remained in the retinue belonging to Jacob.

"God said to Jacob, 'Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there'" [vs. 1]. Right away God takes the initiative, giving Jacob much-needed advice and direction. Actually the Lord directs Jacob away from Shechem which he had just devastated to a place where he had his famous dream of the ladder reaching into heaven with angels ascending and descending. More specifically, Bethel was the formerly named Luz which Jacob changed to its present name (cf. 12.8, Bethel as a place where Abram had built an altar). As far as human beings is concerned, Bethel is located in a deserted place, not even an encampment, but to the angels it is a true metropolis with that special ladder placed dead-center within it as a point of contact between the heavenly and earthly realms. Always that place remained special for Jacob as he looked back during his extended service under Laban. It was a natural refuge for Jacob from his brother Esau who years ago had been hot on his trail and might be so again after what had



transpired at Shechem. Note that God bids Jacob to “dwell” at Bethel, *yashav* suggestive of living there permanently compared with (more recently in Jacob’s case) residing in booths before Shechem. Jacob jumped at this opportunity to be with the angels as they ascended from Bethel into heaven and from heaven to Bethel despite the fact that others of his retinue were blind to the spectacle.

The second command in vs. 1 is “make there an altar to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.” That is to say, arise and go to the place where God was seen on top of the ladder with the angels ascending and descending upon it (cf. 28.12). In the verse at hand the word “there” (*sham*) appears twice with respect to Jacob dwelling and his making of the altar, a fact which stresses the importance of Bethel. This differs from Jacob’s first visit when he erected a pillar from the stone he had used as a pillow (cf. 28.18). Jacob had no problem finding that pillar set up over a quarter century ago since his dream was so vivid and life-changing. Indeed, God reminded Jacob of his flight from Esau which intimates that despite the change of heart Esau has displayed, there remained the possibility that things could change for the worse. Erecting an altar beside the pillow/pillar would ensure Jacob against this threat. But before Jacob went about this task, he bade his “household and those with him” (the latter possibly being those who had joined up with Jacob after his departure from Shechem, even a few survivors from the recent slaughter) with the words “Put away the foreign gods that are among you and purify yourselves and change your garments” [vs. 2]. “Put away” or *sur* suggests a turning aside or withdrawal, not especially destroying them. “Put away the gods which your fathers served” [Jos 24.14]. The word “among” or *tawek* implies that a presence-among the people of these divinities, hard to eradicate all at once. Indeed Jacob realizes how attached some in his company were to the gods they had acquired; for example, some may have follow Rachel’s example who had stolen the household gods. These were the *teraphym* (cf. 31.34) which seem to be different from the “other” gods Laban accuses Jacob of stealing in 31.30. Laban was so upset at not finding his *teraphym* he just blurted out his frustration using the more general term *‘eloyah*. Regardless if there was an actual distinction, Jacob wanted both put away. There may be someone in his company doing what Rachel had done, sitting upon the *teraphym* while Laban—now ironically Jacob—was searching in vain (cf. 31.34: in that instance we don’t know if Rachel subscribed to Laban’s divinities or was out to get revenge for the difficult he caused Jacob).

Both the adjective “foreign” (*nekar*) and the noun “gods” are pretty much one and the same to Jacob, that is, they are strange or alien to the singular divinity revealed to Abraham, Isaac and now Jacob both through his vision at Bethel and his encounter with that mysterious wrestler (*nekar* is included in that quote above from Jos 24.14). Such putting away or *sur* is the first of three steps, the second being a purification or *taher*, a verb which fundamentally means to be bright, to shine and has pre-echoes, if you will, of prescriptions Moses lays down in the Book of Leviticus, for example, “the priest shall pronounce him clean” [Lev 13.6]. The verse at hand, in fact, is the first mention of this practice which later assumed ritual dimensions. The second command is for the people to make a change of their garments, *simlah* applying to a large outer piece of clothing for both men and women. “Then Shem and Japheth took a garment...and covered the nakedness of their father” [9.23]. Even if the people managed to stuff any “foreign gods” in their garments, first their purification and then stripping away of garments would have revealed them on their persons.

Once this threefold purification process had been carried out, Jacob bids the people “let us arise and go up to Bethel” [vs. 3]. This verse has two verbs with reference to an ascent, *qum* (arise) and *halah* (go up), a way of telling the people to get moving as quickly as possible to the safety of Bethel and away from the potential threat of Esau’s wrath, let alone any allies of Shechem which might seek vengeance. Although this threat is real, Jacob wished himself and his people as close as possible to that heavenly ladder. Should Esau or anyone else pose a threat, God was right there ready to have one of his angels

snatch them up into heaven. That *qum* and *halah*—arise and go up—just might apply literally in this instance, not just advancing to Bethel, House of God. Before they ascend to Bethel, Jacob reveals to his people that God commanded him to make an altar, that is, to God who “answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.” That “day of distress” (*tsarah*) was when Jacob had to flee his brother Esau for the safety (followed by the quasi-enslavement) of Laban. The verbal root of *tsarah* means to cleave, a rather graphic word as in Ps 25.17: “The troubles of my heart are enlarged”...the cleavages of my heart are enlarged, causing wide ruptures. Nevertheless, Jacob proclaims that God had been with him in all places he had gone, undoubtedly referring to time spent with Laban. As for the words “wherever I have gone,” the Hebrew has “in the way (*derek*) I have gone,” “way” being synonymous for exile from both his native land and parents. These words were sufficient for everyone to concur with people giving to Jacob “all the foreign gods they had and the rings that were in their ears” [vs. 4]. The rings were taken as part of the booty from Shechem, proud symbols of what the people had done, and must be left behind. Instead of destroying them, Jacob “hid them under the oak which was near Shechem” [vs. 4]. Perhaps he did this out of superstition, of offending the foreign gods, or even keeping them as security for melting down at a later time.

Once having freed themselves of the foreign gods and having taken off their earrings, Jacob and his retinue continued their ascent to Bethel. En route “a terror from God fell upon the cities that were round about them, so that they did not pursue the sons of Jacob” [vs. 5]. The Hebrew text lacks the preposition “from” but has simply “terror (of) God,” the verb being *chitat* which means to break or be broken down by fear. “Be broken, you peoples, and be dismayed; give ear, all you far countries” [Is 8.9]. Such broken-ness was not unlike the physical bodies of all these inhabitants being paralyzed but not suffering destruction, just long enough for Jacob to pass through unharmed. So Jacob—no specific time is given—“came to Luz (that is, Bethel) which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him” [vs. 6]. Shechem itself was in Canaan as well as the other cities whose inhabitants had been “broken” (*chitat*). Even though this paralysis had passed and Jacob was in the midst of their native land, memory of it remained sufficiently long to prevent them from assailing him. Note that the text mentions Luz and puts in parentheses Bethel. Those in Jacob’s company might have been more familiar with the former, unaware that Jacob had changed its name back in 28.16.

So finally Jacob make that altar as he had been commanded close by the stone pillar but changed the name of Bethel slightly to “El-bethel” [vs. 7] or God of Bethel. This never could have taken place without first having buried in the ground the foreign gods acquired by Jacob’s people, for it was the place where God had revealed himself [cf. vs. 7] or *galah*, first use of this verb in the Bible which fundamentally means to make naked. “I revealed myself to the house of your father” [1Sam 2.27]. Once Jacob settled his company at El-Bethel under the protection of God located at the top of that ladder, everyone could breathe a sigh of relief. “And Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse died and she was buried under an oak below Bethel” [vs. 8]. This is the first and only time Deborah as a person is noted though earlier she is mentioned as having gone with Jacob and Rebekah in 24.59. Deborah remained important to Jacob who could have been with him during all those years of servitude to Laban. She was a direct link to his mother in her function as nurse or *meniktah* and must have been considerably older, the reason for her death. With that, Jacob’s direct connection to his mother is severed, for presumably she died sometime after his departure from his father and burial in 49.31. Hopefully Deborah would continue to “nurse” the land from her grave near Bethel and therefore protect it. As for the name of this site, “It was called Allon-bacuth or Oak of Weeping” [vs. 8] and differs considerably from that oak near Shechem under which Jacob had buried the foreign gods and rings.

“God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram and blessed him” [vs. 9]. These words introduce a second account of Jacob’s encounter with God in 32.24-30 where he is given his new name,

Israel. Paddan-aram is the birth place of Rachel and where Jacob had subjected himself to Laban. Vss. 1-15 form a recap which can be taken in the context of the recent burial of Deborah, her closeness to both Rebekah and Jacob. Also it is a benefit for the people with Jacob including his two wives, Leah and Rachel. Prior to this they may have gotten just bits and pieces of the special relationship Jacob enjoyed with God, not the full picture, for Jacob doesn't seem to have shared it with anyone else. Even if he did, no one would comprehend it.

In this second account God says directly to Jacob—not through the intermediary of that mysterious wrestler—“Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob but Israel shall be your name” [vs. 10]. This explanation is more acceptable to Jacob's family and retinue; they would have mocked him if he started speaking such gibberish. Next follows God identifying himself as El Shaddai (cf. vs. 11), the name Jacob's father had used in 28.3 and found earlier in 17.1 when the Lord introduces himself to Abram prior to the covenant of circumcision (cf. 17.1). And so Jacob was familiar with this title, having been used by both his father and grandfather though perhaps little known by those outside their immediate circles. El Shaddai fits in nicely with Abram's original call and has personal ramifications for Jacob: “Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall spring from you” [vs. 11]. Note that Jacob merits not just being made into a nation (*gohy*) but a company (*qahal*) of nations which echoes the blessing of his father, Isaac: “that you may become a company of peoples” [28.3], the first time *qahal* appears in the Bible. So the idea is that Jacob is destined to make an indefinite number of nations, disparate as they might be, into a single *qahal* which recognizes God as El Shaddai. In addition to this assembly, kings will spring from Jacob, *chalatsayim* being the verb (feminine dual) which translates as “loins.” “Gird up your loins like a man” [Job 38.3].

After this recap of the change of names from Jacob to Israel and implying that God himself was the wrestler, “God went up from him in the place where he had spoken with him” [vs. 13]. Two words with similar sound for “went up” and “from him:” *yahal mehalayu* or “went up from upon him.” It took place at Bethel (now changed to El-bethel) designated as a place or *maqom* which can be taken alternately as a home, and this particular home is where the angels dwell upon earth, the angels who have descended on the ladder from heaven. With this ladder in mind, God used it to ascend and take his customary position at the top of it. Once God has ascended, Jacob—still he is referred to as this name, not Israel—“set up a pillar in the place where he had spoken with him, a pillar of stone” [vs. 14]. This second pillar (*matsevah*) seems not so much to replace the original one of 28.18 but another right beside it to commemorate renaming Bethel to El-bethel as well as God's recent communication with him concerning the change of names. *Yatsav* is the verb for “set up” (to put in place) compared with *sum* which applies to a putting in place. Thus the pillar associated with *yatsav* is a larger one compared with smaller one associated with *sum*. Both pillars formed a kind of image of that invisible ladder enabling not just Jacob and his retinue to worship at the place but as a memorial for future generations. The next step was for Jacob to pour a “drink offering on it” in addition to oil [vs. 14]. The former pillar had just oil; the drink offering or *nesek* is a libation. “And the drink offering with it shall be of wine, a fourth of a hin” [Lev 23.14]. This second offering was a mark of communal celebration when Jacob informed his two wives and those with him of his change of name as had been noted above. Once accomplished, Jacob reverted to the former name Bethel in place of El-bethel, the latter name being associated with the altar he had built in vs. 7.

Not long afterwards—no specific time is given but presumably it was brief, just enough to set up the altar and second pillar—“they journeyed from Bethel” [vs. 16]. Bethel was a place of contact between heaven and earth, an angelic metropolis, not suitable for human habitation except as a pilgrimage for worship and sacrifice. The place to which they journeyed isn't mentioned until the end of this chapter,

Mamre, where Isaac had his home (cf. vs. 27). Somewhere en route Rachel “travailed, and she had hard labor” [vs. 17] or “some distance from Ephrath” which may or may not refer to Bethlehem (cf. vs. 19, ‘that is, Bethlehem’). While in the midst of this pain her midwife consoled her by saying that she will give birth to “another son:” “And as her soul was departing (for she died), she called his name Ben-oni” [vs. 18]. The imagery is striking: the *nephesh* of Rachel was leaving her at the very same moment she gave the name to her son, Ben-oni (Son of my sorrow). However, “his father called his name Benjamin” (Son of the right hand or Son of the south). Benjamin is thus the last and only child among those given birth by both Rachel and Leah to have been born in Canaan. Now the twelve sons have been born to Jacob, the foundation upon which the twelve tribes of Israel would rest. To commemorate Rachel, Jacob “set up a pillar upon her grave” [vs. 20], another *matsevah* like that where God had spoken with him in Bethel and earlier in 28.18 after bolding the ladder set up at Bethel. The words “which is there to this day” in reference to Rachel’s tomb show that the author of the text was quite familiar with the site.

Vs. 22 has a brief but curious statement, a kind of interlude en route to Mamre: “While Israel dwelt in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father’s concubine; and Israel heard of it.” Supposedly this incident shows the loss of prestige as first-born. It affected Jacob profoundly because years earlier he had tricked Esau out of his first-born privilege. No action is recorded, just that Israel—not the two uses of Israel as a proper name instead of Jacob—“heard of it.” Surely he’d love to do something, but refrained himself. At this delicate point an disruption might hinder or even bring to nought all that had happened before.

Vss. 22 (that is, the second half of it) through vs. 26 sum up the descendants of Jacob through their respective mothers, Leah, Rachel, Bilhah (Rachel’s maid) and Zilpah (Rachel’s maid). Note mention of Bilhah, the woman with whom Reuben had sexual intercourse (‘Here is my maid Bilhah; go in to her that she may bear upon my knees’). These sons are recounted shortly before Jacob and his retinue reach Mamre so as to have them in position for taking over the land through the formation of twelve tribes. Shortly afterwards “Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre” [vs. 27]. Nothing at all is said about how Isaac had greeted his son, the one who had tricked him many years earlier of Esau’s birthright. Perhaps just the sound of Jacob’s voice was too much for him; after all, Jacob had deceived his father so naturally Isaac would have been wary. It is surprising that Jacob did find his father alive, for when he scurried away, Isaac seemed to be on his deathbed. Those long intervening years of wanting to resolve the birthright problem in favor of Esau must have kept Isaac going, but never did it turn out his way. As for Jacob’s mother Rebekah, we had no mention of her except in 49.31 in reference to her burial. So presumably Rebekah had died. The words “he was gathered to his people” [vs. 29] are significant here for indeed the people of Isaac had been gathered at last in one place. Even Esau is mentioned who helped bury Isaac. Nothing is said about the relationship between the two brothers at this point. Earlier Esau had shown magnanimity toward Jacob which Jacob had declined by leaving him stealthily. Perhaps now with hindsight that was the correct strategy; should Jacob remain with him and that formidable group of four hundred men (cf. 33.1), chances are he would never escape and Esau would have reclaimed his birthright by violence. As for Isaac’s burial, there must have been some pre-arrangement; those four hundred men must have been absent as well as Jacob’s retinue. Thus only Jacob and Esau were left alone to bury their father.

### Chapter Thirty-Six

This chapter begins with the words “These are the descendants of Esau (that is, Edom).” It continues for forty-two verses outlining Esau’s heritage, if you will, a fitting conclusion for someone who had been cheated out of his birthright. Despite his wild character and unsuitability for this birthright, Esau



did turn out to be the more gracious of the two brothers as when they met many years later. Still, Jacob's wariness of him betrayed a latent tendency within Esau for taking revenge when everything fell into line with his schemes. And so from the these descendants of Esau/Edom the narrative returns to Jacob who is approaching the end of his life and from whom the mantle, if you will, will be handed over to Joseph.