

Chapter Twenty

This chapter parallels that of Chapter Twelve, the journey of the then-named 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 these survivors 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 a conflict about 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 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 have 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 the appeal of Sarah). “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 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 that God is utterly transcendent 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 lack 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 and therefore manipulate him. 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; it stands out because it is 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 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: 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 to Abimelech’s 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 dawn: “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 to himself. 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 50:3]. 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, 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 that 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 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 at the time 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 hearkens 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 *gama* 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. *Mishte*, 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 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 *raha* 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 *ra'ah* 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. Beside 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, at long last Hagar 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 *érets* 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, *gaza* 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 both had undergone thus far. So many instances as these makes you wonder why Abraham hadn’t tossed God aside and adopt the native deities of Canaan. As for the verb *nasah*, another references is Eccl 7.23: “All this I have tested by wisdom.” Here the testing consists in God calling Abraham by his proper name for the first time in order to see his response. 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 who could die any day. 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 when the Lord promised 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 consists of hilly territory. 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 immature, 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 party 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 made Isaac realize that something out of the ordinary was about to happen; besides, 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 Moriah 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 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 the intended sacrifice. 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 reverence to God. 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 ascended 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.

In what seems a matter-of-fact way reflecting his submission to God's pleasure, 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, 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. He is not unlike the true mother of that child King Solomon was about to divide in half with a sword, having stepped forward spontaneously and without what anyone else was thinking. 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 compared with 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 of all the pioneers from Haran, hers was the first death and burial in Canaan to have been recorded. 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” [Ecc 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 want 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 whole 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 the situation 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 how 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, quite unlike 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 outdoors 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 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 *érets* (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. However, that was to be put on hold for over four hundred years as we see later in the Joseph saga, a preparation for the Exodus. 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 *mal'ak* 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 woman 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 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 be translated 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)... "excessively fair." 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 about 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 who unexpectedly showed up at their well with a caravan of camels. 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 so much 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]. By being able to maintain his *charash*, the servant 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 must have seemed an eternity for the servant yet 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 totally dark 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 most suitable 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. This trait was to become known later on in his dealing with Jacob. 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, we never 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 this 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, the *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 himself 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 to 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 overcome, 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 breached their walls and were on the threshold (literally) of taking their city captive. 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. No doubt that she had 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 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 intimate that insofar as Rebekah acted as mother to Isaac, the same relationship between these two young people would follow the same pattern of intimacy 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 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 a 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, send him back to Nahor in order 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. With Isaac on the verge of owning all that belonged to his father, he and Rebekah would make the foothold in Canaan 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 dishing 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 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, especially revelations by the Lord, in 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 place 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 is obviously 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 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 getting the scraps. 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. 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 and consolation. 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.

An important note here at the conclusion of Chapter Twenty-Five, the halfway point of the Book of Genesis. Recall the Hebrew word *rahav* which had been mentioned in the brief Introduction. Originally *rahav* was intended as a liturgical pause. It can be expanded as a pause offering time for reflection on the sacred text which, in turn, leads to resting in God's presence. Because of its importance, *rahav* 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, *rahav* 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 following in his father's steps there 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 made him focus exclusively upon getting along 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’* 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 the names aren’t 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 things were 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]. *Shava* 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 to 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 much 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 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 the close bond between father and his first-born. 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.

Jacob'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, his mind filled 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 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, she remained 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 the small confines of 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 the person before 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 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] (It might be more accurate to say, 'burst in from his hunting'). The verse says that Jacob left his father; it would be more appropriate 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 unknown to him, 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 nosy 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 harkens 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 was at home 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.