

## Chapter Sixteen

“Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, bore him no children.” Depressing words after so much was said about Sarai in the last chapter. However, her barrenness reveals a key underlying fact of Genesis, the propagation of the human race and its stubborn tendency not to be faithful to God. Things didn’t start off that way but went downhill after the first man and woman were banished from the garden of Eden. It also puts God in an awkward situation, one he’d rather avoid. Of all the people sprung from this first man and woman through Noah and through Abram (the point where we find ourselves now), God had to focus upon a handful of people while the rest remain pretty much unnoticed. Even among this depressingly small number it boils down to just one man per generation. Most members of his family, both close and extended, tag along for the ride, if you will. They function as progenitors for the human race by reason of the close association with the man of God. Although this is depressing and makes one wonder if the same is true today, it appears to have some validity and signals a lack of sensitivity for things spiritual then as well as for now. At the same time hope always is extended to everyone willing to reach out for it. This rather stark reality isn’t intended to make readers of the stories of Genesis despair of their own relationship with God but is a way of saying that the path laid out is one full of adventure as well as fraught with danger.

Chapter Sixteen opens with that double bind of Sarai who was barren while at the same time having been promised by the Lord through her husband that his descendants will inherit the land in which they find themselves. Even these descendants will be carried off somewhere and remain in an alien land for four generations. That threat didn’t sound so strange to Abram who was living in the midst of Canaanites who at any moment might swoop down and obliterate him and his group. While ancient peoples were quite efficient at maintaining their heritage over many centuries through oral means, the Lord didn’t want to rely on that means of transmission. The time span of four generations will hardly distort the cultural heritage of Abram’s descendants. Besides, one person in each generation—should it come down to that—was sufficient to keep alive the relationship of mankind with the Lord. It happened before and can happen again.

To Sarai’s credit, she offered her Egyptian handmaid (*shiphchah*: that term was used first in 12.16), Hagar, to her husband with the hope of producing an heir. Most likely Hagar was acquired in Egypt when Abram was forced to dwell there due to the famine. Hagar must have come from a well-to-do family because early on Abram got involved with Pharaoh, highly unusual for a foreigner. While Sarai was in “Pharaoh’s house” (12.15), she was put in custody by retainers to look after her. Hagar could have been such a retainer sympathetic to Sarai’s plight and was instrumental behind the scenes in having her treated well. So when Pharaoh was afflicted with plagues, he could have suspected Hagar at playing a role in this though never could he prove it. Still, things got dangerous for Hagar, and it was natural for her to beg Sarai to speed her out of Egypt incognito thereby escaping her master’s clutches. That possible close relationship between the two women had something to do with Sarai offering Hagar to Abram for sexual intercourse. After all, the two women had become close as sisters and Hagar a kind of second wife to Abram. Obviously Hagar was indebted to Abram just as much as her mistress.

“Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my maid; it may be that I shall obtain children by her” [vs. 2]. Another use of *hineh* (‘behold,’ as in 15.4), a way of getting someone’s attention. A person doesn’t have to come right out and express *hineh* verbally. *Hineh* can be manifested by one’s bearing or facial expression. Regardless, *hineh* is a communication—even a pre-communication—of being present to someone primarily by a gesture or expression before a word comes out of your mouth. The words that follow (and they can be many) spell out in so many ways

the compactness of that one word, *hineh*. Such is the case with Sarai who desires her husband to have sexual relations with Hagar the *shiphchah* or handmaid. What here corresponds to this *hineh* is the verb “prevented” or *hatsar* which fundamentally means to shut, hold back, restrain. “And he shut up the heavens” [Dt 11.17]. Actually this is the first time Sarai does any speaking. She had accompanied Abram from Haran to Canaan and then their harrowing experience in Egypt. All the while Sarai shared in Abram’s trials and tribulations and was the person most responsible for providing an heir. Abram did the talking with the Lord whereas Sarai (or more accurately, she and Hagar) did the work.

The words “it may be that I shall obtain children by her” can be read in light of that close relationship between Sarai and Hagar stemming from their days in the court of Pharaoh. Hagar wasn’t given to Abram as a thing but as another Sarai; Abram cherished her for having protected his wife while they were in Egypt, so he felt obliged to follow the wishes of both women. “And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai.” Thus concludes vs. 2 where listening to this voice (*qol*) is equivalent to Sarai’s *hineh* or “behold” at the beginning of this verse. It doesn’t matter whether or not Hagar was present during this exchange. She would have concurred with Sarai anyway, wanting an heir for Abram just as much as anyone else. However, Sarai knew she was an Egyptian, a intimation of some four centuries beforehand of what would happen to the Israelite stock once it had been permeated by Egyptian culture and religion. Even now it was happening quickly to Abram in Canaan.

“So after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan.” Such is the beginning of vs. 3 which interestingly enough interjects this time span which begins once Abram had left Egypt after having taken refuge there during the famine in Canaan. That means he, Sarai and Hagar had dwelt in Canaan for a fairly substantial time, time enough for all three to know each other well. Sarai the wife (*’esheth*) now acts, if you will, as mother of the bride or putting it another way, as sister-to-sister in giving Hagar to Abram “as a wife (*’esheth*).” An unusual exchange by any standards, of one wife presenting another wife to a husband, but not that unusual given the close relationship between Sarai and Hagar which had begun in Pharaoh’s court. After Abram had intercourse with Hagar, she turned on her mistress which must have been quite a shock. “She (Hagar) looked with contempt (*qalal*) on her mistress” [vs. 4]. “Those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed” [2Sam 3.20]. The fundamental idea laying behind the verb is to be light, a concept which transfers easily over to treating a person lightly or without respect. The Hebrew text adds “in her eyes” which adds to the affront to Sarai. So here we have two foreign women in a foreign land where one has the apparent advantage over the other, this after repeated promises by the Lord that Abram will beget descendants. It was a promise, but the Lord didn’t say who’d give birth, Hagar or Sarai.

“May the wrong done to me be on you” [vs. 5]! Harsh words from Sarai to her husband, right from her heart, and possibly said while Hagar was either looking on or listening in to their exchange, all the while smiling to herself. *Chamas* is the word for “wrong” which alternately means violence, oppression. “The earth is filled with violence” [6.11] referring to the world before the flood. Although Sarai spoke of this *chamas* done to her by Abram, she didn’t have to act it out. Just stating the fact would have been sufficient to reduce Abram to nothing. While Sarai was blurting this out, immediately there flashed before Abram all those divine promises of future descendants. Now those promises, especially the recent dream when he had been knocked out cold, seemed to be an illusion. Sarai continued her assault upon Abram by saying that “May the Lord judge between you and me!” after she repeated the treachery apparently perpetrated by Hagar. Actually it was Sarai who proposed that Abram lay with Hagar yet Abram didn’t mention this fact. Perhaps he was too overwhelmed at the attack on his integrity. Now that a child had been born, Sarai finds it too much to bear and attempts to blame the wrong person.

Once Sarai brought the Lord into this contention by wanting him to act as judge, only then did Abram step in and respond. “Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her as you please” [vs. 6]. Abram acknowledges that Sarai is stressed out and tries to extricate himself from a sticky situation as quickly and as deftly as he can. Earlier mention was made of Eliezer of Damascus, the heir-apparent to Abram. When he got wind of this sharp disagreement he must have taken some satisfaction at his master being rebuked by his own wife. Abram looked at Eliezer not so much with anger but with renewed interest; at least he would have been a better choice than the situation in which he found himself. Surely Eliezer didn’t offer advice to his master but watched passively and with some amusement at having been vindicated. In vs. 6 we find another use of *hineh* (behold) which is used differently than earlier instances. *Hineh* is the only word Abram can get out of his mouth which is a preface to his suggestion about getting rid of Hagar. Abram uttered it neither in anger nor in shame but neutrally because he wished to diffuse his wife’s anger by redirecting it to someone else. The words “in your power” read in Hebrew “in your hands” which is more one-on-one. “Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.” *Hanah* is the verb for “deal harshly” and is one of those Hebrew verbs with a wide variety of meanings and shades of meaning. The idea of exertion (physical or otherwise) seems to be its essence. In the case at hand, the words in the text contain *beheyenayk* (‘in your eyes’) which is similar in sound to the verb’s form, *tehaneha*. One gets the impression, therefore, that the *hanah* Sarai gives to Hagar goes right from her eyes in a penetrating fashion. Nothing is said about the nature of this *hanah* nor how long it lasted. Abram remained aloof, not wanting to aggravate Sarai further. Eliezer had neither to say nor do anything. So with three people allied against her, Hagar had no choice but to flee “from her face” as the Hebrew reads...flee to get away from that penetrating glance directed at her no matter what she might do. The anger was so intense that neither Abram nor Sarai had concern for Hagar’s future child. As far as they were concerned, it was as good as dead.

The story now turns to Hagar. Though we don’t hear more from Abram, Sarai nor Eliezer, we can presume that they didn’t talk with each other for a very long time. As for this servant from Damascus, the prospect arose again that he might become Abram’s heir. Denied once, Eliezer would try his best not to be deprived again though the text is silent on the matter. He is removed fully out of the picture later when Sarai at last gives birth to Isaac. In the meantime, Abram had to deal with Eliezer’s scheming which may have played a part in him being reconciled with Sarai to form an alliance against him. As for Hagar, she simply fled...to where is unknown, but better anywhere than with her former mistress. “The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness” [vs. 7]. Hagar must have known the lay of the land; she wouldn’t just walk out into the wilderness blindly but to a spot which contained a spring. This word (*hahayn*) also means “eye” perhaps because of the gleam produced by the movement of both which represents life. Though Abram wouldn’t admit it openly, chances are that he knew Hagar would aim for the spring which was “on the way to Shur.” After all, springs were well-known among desert dwellers. Shur is mentioned as a region, not a town, in 20.1 as located “toward the territory of the Negeb” and later in Ex 15.22: “Then Moses led Israel onward from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur.” This reference is immediately after the miraculous deliverance of Israel from the Egyptians, i.e., the Exodus. Did the Israelites recall that they were in the same area as their one of their ancestors? Did they expect a second deliverance, one where a spring would appear? This indeed happened once Moses purified the waters of Marah (Bitterness). The reason for such bitterness was that Hagar’s son turned out to be Ishmael whose descendants were at enmity with Israel. Only someone like Moses—and he must have modeled himself after Abram—could effect such a saving miracle.

An “angel (*mal’ak*) of the Lord” or messenger of the Lord was the one who discovered Hagar, not the

Lord himself. This divine representative indicates that despite Hagar being favored, she wasn't on the same level as Abram to have a one-on-one relationship with the Lord. The *mal'ak* went on a search throughout the desert as suggested by the word "found" (Hagar). He started out from the place of residence belonging to Abram and knew as well as they that anyone would head for the nearest spring or well. The incident with Hagar also intimates a further separation has taken place between the Lord and mankind. Previously the Lord himself had intervened directly and spoke with equal directness to those he had chosen, Abram being the latest example. Now with the introduction of a *mal'ak* (the first mention in the Bible) we have a further degree of removal between the divine and human realms which traces its roots all the way back to the first man's expulsion from the garden of Eden.

"Hagar, maid of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going" [vs. 8]? Surely the angel knew all about this but wished to get her attention as he walked up from behind, having followed her footsteps from Abram's camp. This *mal'ak* was invisible not just to Hagar but to Abram and Sarai. That means as soon as the Lord had spotted trouble brewing, he sent his *mal'ak* to work on Hagar's behalf. Though the words "maid of Hagar" must have annoyed her since they were reminiscent of Sarai, the angel had to speak that way to put her at ease, that he knew her identity. We don't have a record of Hagar being astonished, intimating that at this juncture the angel assumed a human guise. At least the divine presence is still active in human affairs. Besides, Hagar demonstrates no signs of fear nor surprise but says in a matter-of-fact way, "I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai." The words "am fleeing" imply that Hagar has stopped at the spring temporarily, most likely en route back home via Shur to Egypt and Pharaoh's court. She harbored the fear that Sarai might send some of her husband's retinue and slay her in the wilderness unknown to anybody. If Hagar remained into Egypt, she would divulge valuable information as to the weakness of Abram and his retinue, that still he had no descendants and was vulnerable for an attack. That's part of the reason why the Lord dispatched the angel to Hagar...not just to save her and her son but to prevent her return to Egypt. It turns out that she doesn't go there but remains in Canaan though at a safe distance from Abram.

The angel asked—we should say begged—Hagar to return "to your mistress and submit to her" [vs. 9]. She didn't want to hear these words but complied, grumbling within herself during her walk back. Was she a prodigal daughter like the son in Jesus' parable? Not exactly, for she was driven away from Abram against her own will. After all, Hagar was only following the order of her mistress to have intercourse with Abram. *Hanah* is the verb for "submit," the same one used in vs. 6, "Sarai dealt harshly with her." That sounds like a runaway slave returning to her mistress. Certainly Hagar wouldn't have consented unless the angel gave a good reason: "I will so greatly multiply your descendants that they cannot be numbered for multitude" [vs. 10]. We've heard these words before a number of times, the Lord speaking with Abram about his descendants. However, to date nothing has come of it except disappoint and promises unfulfilled. With Hagar, it's a different story. The angel is the one making the promise, not the Lord, which has greater force because he is present to Hagar in human guise, neither a voice communicated in a dream nor a voice whispered quietly in a tent. Actually the angel's words sound more extravagant than anything the Lord had communicated to Abram. *Ravah* is the word for "multiply"—not used with Abram—but the same verb when God created various beings: "Be fruitful and multiply." This verb is used twice with a noun derived from the same verbal root as a sign of Hagar's fertility. The major difference is that nothing is said of Hagar's descendants inheriting the land as was the case with Abram even though the child to be born is his son.

"Behold, you are with child and shall bear a son" [vs. 11]. This verse is preceded by the third time with the words "the angel of the Lord said to her" (vss. 8 though minus 'the Lord,' and vs. 10). Did Hagar know that it was a *mal'ak* speaking with her—and if so—did she know it was "of the Lord?" Possibly not, but in the second instance the *mal'ak* revealed special knowledge of her ('you are with child,' vs.

11). This was dearest to her heart, having a child with the promise of descendants. This interjection of words pertinent to the *mal'ak* speaking with Hagar was crucial to overcome her reluctance. Instead of demonstrating no fear, Hagar revealed a practical attitude, of getting out her predicament. The angel's words are reminiscent of Lk 1.31, "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son." Unlike the *mal'ak* dealing with Hagar, the *mal'ak* Gabriel needs to calm Mary's fears with "do not be afraid." That leads to the identity of this anonymous *mal'ak*, that he is Gabriel and practicing, if you will, for his encounter with Mary. This boldness on Hagar's part shows how strong she is, a trait passed on to her son Ishmael. As in both cases, the mothers don't bestow a name upon their sons yet to be born. With Hagar, his name is to be Ishmael or "God hears" with the verb coming first in this proper name and 'El or God coming after it: literally, "hears God." The angel spells out to Hagar the nature of this hearing (*shamah* is the verb) with "because the Lord has given heed to your affliction." Actually there's a kind of interplay between the two verbs, both of similar sound: *shamah/hanah* or heard/affliction. These words echo those of the Lord four generations later to Moses: "I have seen the affliction (the same word as in the verse at hand) of my people who are in Egypt" [Ex 3.77]. The difference: with the *mal'ak* it's a question of the Lord hearing Hagar's affliction whereas with Moses, a question of seeing it.

"He shall be a wild ass of a man" [vs. 12]. These words astonished Hagar because they revealed a side of Abram's character, his adventurous spirit at having come from Hanan to Canaan. Later Abram must have expressed similar fear and astonishment, even jealousy, because an angel had such direct and intimate conversation with Hagar. As for Sarai, nothing is said of her reaction; perhaps it's best to have gone unrecorded, given the ill-treatment she showed toward Hagar. *Pere'* is the word for "ass" which connotes stubbornness as well as speed, the latter more in tune with the verbal root. "A wild ass used to the wilderness" [Jer 2.24]. Actually, the words at hand read in Hebrew "wild ass man." The prospect of begetting a *pere' adam* or "wild ass man" is compounded by "his hand against every man and every man's hand against him." To some extent, Abram can sympathize with this, he being an alien under threat of attack which could come at any time. Vs. 12 ends with "and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen." That means Ishmael, belonging to the beduin tribes in the southern wilderness, will be at odds with those permanent settlers stemming from Abram's stock. Actually the word "dwell" (*yashav*) is a bit inaccurate since it connotes living in settled communities.

"You are a God of seeing" (*re'ay*): words addressed by Hagar in vs. 13 not so much to the *mala'k* or angel who had followed her into the wilderness. This is demonstrated by what precede it, "So she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her." That is to say, Hagar addresses the Lord's name (*shem*) directly, not through the *mal'ak*. Hagar was addressing the same Lord as Abram even though she was an Egyptian who believed in a multiplicity of gods and goddesses. Word of this must have reached Abram quickly who was upset that a mere maidservant—a foreigner at that—should be given such a clear revelation while he was stuck with hearing the Lord. Hagar continues this rather remarkable confession with (as it reads in the Hebrew), "Have I ever seen after him who sees me?" It's a question the remains unanswered but is within the context of an angel coming to Hagar's assistance with the promise of a child. Thus the question is more of wonder both to the angel and to the Lord.

This seeing of Hagar by the Lord in the company of an angel gives rise to the place name, Beer-la'hai-roi which means "the well of one who sees and lives," that is, referring to Hagar. The seeing at hand belongs to an earlier stage of divine revelation compared with the later one to Moses' in Ex 33.20: "But you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live." The location is a well, the "spring on the way to Shur" [vs. 7] which Hagar must have known where she would rest and take flight home into Egypt. The interchange between Hagar and the angel in the Lord's presence as one who sees may be

paralleled with the dialogue Jesus has with the Samaritan woman at the well. Hagar differs from the Samaritan woman in that she has insight into the Lord with regard to seeing whereas the latter's questions to Jesus center around what the well represents: "Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst" [Jn 4.14]. The former pertains to sight and the latter to taste, tasting the water which wells "up to eternal life." As for Beer-la'hai-roi, it's interesting that later Isaac (the son born by Sarai to Abram) dwells there (cf. 25.11).

"And Hagar bore Abram a son" [vs. 15]. Hagar, who has seen (the Lord) and lived, has returned to Abram at the angel's request (cf. vs. 9) but unlike the prodigal son since she was banished against her will. Nothing is said about how Abram, let alone Sarai, received her. Abram was delighted because Hagar gave birth, but Sarai was bitter because like the brother of the prodigal son, never left home and resented the return of her maid whom she had driven away. Any alienation between Abram and Sarai is left unsaid which is more prudent. As for the birth of Hagar's son, it seems to have taken place with Abram present, not in the wilderness. That's why Abram gave the male child a name, Ishmael which means, as noted earlier, "God hears." Abram attributes hearing to the child of the mother who "sees and lives." The concluding verse of Chapter Sixteen states Abram's age, eighty-six. That advanced age sets the stage for what is to come, the birth of Isaac later in Chapter Twenty-One. As for Hagar, she will face yet another banishment at the hands of Sarai.

## Chapter Seventeen

"The Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless.'" Such is the third appearance (*ra'ah* is used, the common verb 'to see') to Abram, the other two being described in 12.7 and 15.1. Despite the mention of these occurrences, nothing more communicated as to the form or character of the divine appearance, let alone Abram's ability to recognize it. One thing is for certain, that this seeing takes place suddenly and without warning. It occurs thirteen years after "Hagar bore Abram a son" [16.15] which means the existence of a fairly long period when Abram went about his business, all the while wondering what he was doing in Canaan. And so, Abram's attention was somewhere else, preoccupied and feeling sorry for himself and Sarai when suddenly he quickly and decisively acknowledges this divine presence. As for the seeing at hand, Abram was advanced in years (ninety-nine) or twenty-four years after he had departed Haran (cf. vs. 4), the time spent in Canaan plus that unintended sojourn in Egypt. That's a long time, especially when you're old, to be an exile with constant threats from the local inhabitants. Even to use the verb *ra'ah* at an age when vision at best is limited shows the vitality of Abram. On top of it were those painful promises of having a descendant and inheriting the land capped off by Hagar giving birth to a child instead of his wife. Chances are that as soon as Abram heard the words "I am God Almighty" he said to himself something like "not again."

This time it was slightly different, usually the case with each successive appearance to Abram. Here the Lord said he was "God Almighty" or *'El Shaddai*, this title meaning literally God Most Powerful who bids Abram not only to walk (*halak*) before him but to be blameless (*tamym*). The last person to be called *tamym* is Noah: "blameless in his generation" [6.9], that being prior to the flood and construction of the ark. Note the walking: "before me" or literally "to my face" (*lepanay*). Two predecessors, Noah and Enoch, had walked with God, examples of intimate companionship in imitation of the Lord walking in the garden of Eden, 3.8 (there it was a matter of the 'sound of the Lord God walking'). However, this *halak* or walking was before the Lord's face, of being in the glare of the divine regard and was not as pleasant, to put it somewhat inaccurately, as the walking with God enjoyed by Enoch and Noah. With its emphasis upon perfection and completeness *tamym* seems out of reach for any person, so for the Lord to ask Abram to become such appears impossible. However,

the Lord wishes Abram to tend in that direction—not get there all at once—which is why the verb *halak* is used. Abram was familiar with *halak*; after all, he had walked from Haran to Canaan. And so *halak* and *tamym* work hand-in-hand with Abram from this point on. It is a new step forward, not backward, as earlier encounters with the Lord may have seemed to Abram (and to his wife Sarai as well).

In the next verse (vs. 2) the Lord says “And I will make my covenant between me and you and will multiply you exceedingly.” These words echo 15.18 which were spoken when Abram was in that three-fold sleep resembling death. What is the nature of this covenant or *beryth*, a word which connotes cutting, and when will it happen? That’s what Abram wants to know at ninety-nine years of age; any day he could die. “Multiply exceedingly:” the adverb here consists of a repetition of the word *me’od* or *me’od me’od* which can read something like “excessively excessively.” Thus with Abram who left Haran at seventy-five we have a continuous effusion of promises by God yet not fulfilled in the alien land of Canaan.

“Then Abram fell on his face” [vs. 3]. He doesn’t walk (*halak*) with God but stops dead in his tracks. Even though Abram demonstrated a clear response of worship and awe, while flat on the ground he must have said to himself “but when?!...” Consider the use “face” in the previous verse as noted in conjunction with “before me” (*lepanay*, literally as ‘to my face’). Did Abram actually see the Lord who, as vs. 1 said, had appeared to him? Here, as in so many other instances of divine appearances, emphasis is upon the person listening to what God communicates, not so much what and how he sees. The act of hearing has a more durable impact which passes on to future generations as opposed to a vision of God. For ancients, hearing and therefore oral transmission were more important than what had been written down. And so while Abram lay prostrate upon the ground (and this is the land of Canaan destined for his descendants), the Lord alters his words spoken in vs. 2 (‘And I will make my covenant’) to “Behold, my covenant is with you.” The familiar *hineh* (behold) is to get Abram’s attention, to make him realize that the *beryth* exists here and now with him. However, that has to be spelled out in vs. 10 in terms of circumcision. So if the divine *beryth* “is with you,” in a real sense it is a matter of Abram waking up and realizing it even though later the *beryth* will be given in terms of a veritable cutting, one of circumcision.

In 12.2 the Lord said to Abram “I will make of you a great nation (*goy*)” but now in 17.4 he says “father of a multitude of nations.” In other words, the divine promises begins with one nation and expands considerably when Abram is at the threshold of death to a *hamon* of nations, that word being derived from the verbal root *hamah*, basically as to make a humming sound and often is applied in a military context (here ‘troops’ is the word of interest): “And I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the river Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand” [Judg 4.7]. And so it seems the older Abram gets, the more extravagant becomes God’s promises to him, yet they are not realized insofar as Sarai has not begotten a child to get the process going.

Vs. 5 marks an important turning point for the aged Abram: “No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham.” That boils down to no longer being called something like “exalted father” or ‘*av* (father) + *ram* (lifted high, from *ramah*) to ‘*av* (father) of a multitude (*raham*; similar to *hamah* with regard to vs. 4, “*hamon* of nations.” Surely when all this was transpiring—and Abram was still prostrate upon the ground—he must have had deep regrets at these promises occurring when he might die at any moment. Even when Abram left Haran at seventy-five he was old; until then his life was pretty much uneventful and would have remained such. All this divine intercourse jammed in at the end of his life must have tempted Abram to think that he was an instrument of some cruel divine

whimsy. Prior to his calling we know nothing of his long life.

Vs. 6 mentions again (cf. vs. 2) those two adverbs put together to show divine copiousness, *me'od me'od* or "excessively excessively," which related to Abram being fruitful (*parah*). This term is reminiscent of 1.28 when God had spoken to the first man and woman, a thought that surely was on Abram's mind all the while since he departed from Haran. In addition to repeating that Abram will bring forth nations, the Lord adds "kings." As for that form of government, it will not take place (at least in Israel) for some time and much against the Lord's wishes: "but they have rejected me from being king over them" [1Sam 8.7]. Vs. 6 speaks of the covenant being with Abram whereas vs. 7 says that the Lord will establish it "between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you." This is really putting it to Abram who, as noted earlier, had heard this before. Yet the Lord had in mind his advanced age and that he required reassurance...not just Abram but his wife, Sarai. The verb used for establishing (*qum*) a covenant suggests that it will rise continuously from one generation to another and not cease. This is followed by a refinement of the Lord's earlier promises when he puts into context the land or '*erets* as that "of your sojournings" (*magor*). Here is the first time this noun is used pertaining to Canaan and suggests tarrying with the intent of not remaining there but of waiting for something to happen. "Jacob sojourned in the land of Ham" [Ps 105.23].

Finally—at long last—the Lord gets down to business as to the exact nature of the covenant he has been drilling into Abram's head, the one intended for him to keep, the verb *shamar* which applies to observing and protecting. *Shamar* applies very frequently to observance of the Torah and divine commands: "But now I have kept your word" [Ps 119.67]. The Lord establishes this covenant to Abram close to its literal sense of *beryth*, something cut: "Every male among you shall be circumcised (*mul*)" [vs. 10]. Prior to this Abram must have had in mind the *beryth* of Noah "between me and you and every living creature that is with you for all generations" [9.12]. So when Abram heard this direct, short sentence from the Lord he must have been surprised, even a bit frightened, at the prospect of something so intimate and physical required of him: putting the sign of circumcision on a genital organ which is bound up with the propagation of Abram's descendants. While Abram was still laying on the ground ('on his face,' vs.3) it was natural for him to be tempted to get up and protest; however, he remains there without moving. Next the Lord spells out this circumcision as being "in the flesh of your foreskins" which "shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you" [vs. 11] which obviously applies to males. That this is not the *beryth* per se but its sign, '*oth*; the same applies to the *beryth* with respect to the rainbow, 9.12. And so, the only two covenants with mankind thus far involve an '*oth* which makes the *beryth* visible...not that it was not visible but required a coming-out or public manifestation.

Vs. 12 goes into some detail as to those males to be circumcised whether born in Abraham's (his new name as of vs. 5) household or not. The most important aspect of circumcision is that it takes place eight days after birth, a time parallel to the seven days of creation plus one day or the day after creation. "And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus" [Lk 2.21]. Inclusion of all males associated with the household of Abraham reveals the importance of that '*oth* or sign of the *beryth*, not just the *beryth* itself. As for any uncircumcised male, he "shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant" [vs. 14]. The Hebrew is quite vivid here. *Nephesh* means "soul" (i.e., 'breath') and applies to the person at hand ('he'). This "soul" will be "cut off" or *karath*, the verbal root for *beryth*. And so a reverse covenant, if you will, is prescribed, brought home all the more by use of *nephesh* to indicate the essence of the person. The verb used for breaking the covenant is *parar* which is more a rendering void. "The house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken my covenant" [Jer 11.10]. A fairly substantial amount of detail is given about this covenant with Abraham still prostrate upon the ground and not recording them. Such is the nature of a divine



communication; it makes such an impact upon you and in the briefest of all seconds while at the same time enabling you to easily recall the details.

“As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name” [vs. 15]. This occurs after details about the covenant of circumcision as well as Abraham’s change of names in vs. 5. The proper name Sarah means princess and is a variation of Sarai. Apparently she has no say in the matter and must take her name change in accord with obedience to her husband. It didn’t matter so much to her at this advanced age, figuring that the both of them soon will pass away after all the communication from God about descendants, etc. Nevertheless, the name change must have been difficult for both, having been so accustomed to their familiar names for approximately one hundred years. At this juncture the Lord comes right out with the words Abraham (and Sarah) want to hear after so many travails: “I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her; I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations” [vs. 16]. Sarah doesn’t receive this from the Lord directly but must rely upon Abraham to communicate it to her. The text has nothing about how and when Abraham spoke with his wife about this, but we can glean her reaction from an incident about to take place, the promise of a son by the mysterious visitors: “So Sarah laughed to herself” [18.12]. Then as with the situation at hand Sarah keeps her amazement to herself, believing neither the visitors nor her husband.

“Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed” [vs. 17], a gesture which foretells Sarah’s experience just noted. Privately or away from God’s presence Abraham asks himself (the word is *lev* or heart), “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old?” And so we have two actions transpiring at once, Abraham’s self-questioning as a natural response yet belaying the fact that he does not have complete trust in the Lord. Abraham isn’t to be blamed after all the promises the Lord had made, especially the incident with Hagar becoming pregnant instead of Sarah. That pregnancy doesn’t bode well either because the son to be born (Ishmael) will turn out just as troublesome as the Canaanites among whom Abraham has found himself for the past ten years or so. As for Ishmael, Abraham shows compassion and intercedes on his behalf: “O that Ishmael might live in your sight” [vs. 18]! Despite the fact that Sarah remains childless, at least Abraham has a son by her Egyptian slave. The response from the Lord? A flat outright “no.” The Lord’s response isn’t one of open hostility but of taking into consideration Ishmael’s quasi-legitimate birth from Hagar.

All the talk from the Lord about Abraham and Sarah being progenitors must have seemed to be on the verge of devolving into meaningless rhetoric, even if it was divine, words they’ve heard before and will continue even in their advanced years. However, the Lord introduces something new by saying that Sarah’s child will be named Isaac. That proper name has as its verbal root the *tsachaq* as in vs. 17 meaning that the yet-to-be-born Isaac will have his birth rooted in a kind of ironic disbelief his father expressed toward God. If ever there was a son to be named after his father and the experiences he had undergone, Isaac is right on the mark. The Lord shifts emphasis to Isaac and his descendants with whom he will make a covenant. That would be fine with Abraham—the covenant of circumcision would, as far as he could see, apply to Isaac—but did the Lord have in mind another type of covenant? That remains to be seen. To Abraham’s surprise, the Lord addresses Ishmael, the half-brother of the yet-to-be-born Isaac: “I have heard you; behold, I will bless him and make him fruitful” [vs. 20]. We don’t hear of Ishmael addressing the Lord; after all, he was still young, but it’s to reassure him after Abraham asked the Lord for Ishmael to live in his sight (cf. vs. 18). The prospect of Ishmael becoming the “father of twelve princes” is a bit intimidating for Abraham, Ishmael having been begotten by the Egyptian maidservant. So despite this and that fact that Ishmael will become a great nation (cf. vs. 20), the Lord said “I will establish my covenant with Isaac whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year” [vs. 21]. “Season” is *mohed* or a set time, equivalent to the New Testament sense of *kairos*, that term being used here in the Septuagint (Greek) translation. As for *mohed*, it was used first in

1.14: “let them (lights) be for signs and for seasons.” Later it is used to designate feast days and the congregation celebrating them: “your new moons and your appointed feasts” [Is 1.14]. Since the Lord had been speaking with Abraham all the way back to the beginning of Chapter Seventeen, surely Abraham must have recalled the time as well as the place where it occurred and marked it well as a *mohed*. That means Abraham would return to that very spot at the same time to see how the Lord would respond. Sarah was just as excited if not more so because she would bear the long-promised son, Isaac. As for Sarah’s disdain for Hagar once she got pregnant with Ishmael, we have nothing about Hagar’s response who seems to be made of sterner stuff than her mistress.

“When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham” [vs. 22]. There’s no indication of any type of descent when the Lord begins this extended conversation, just that he “appeared to Abram” in vs. 1. Still, there must have been some way the Lord had gotten the attention of the then named Abram, some form of coming down, if you will. Perhaps the Lord didn’t start off with a descent to Abram’s level but crept up upon him gradually because Abram was face down upon the ground. The Hebrew text is more vivid which reads literally, “the Lord went up (*halah*) from upon (*mehal*) Abraham” with *mehal* comprised of two prepositions, *min* (from) and *hal* (upon). Thus *mehal* implies that the Lord had been physically right on Abraham, pinning him down. Once during the pinning did Abraham manage to get up off the ground as implied in vs. 17 when he had fallen upon his face. As is usual with biblical accounts of God or one of his representatives in the guise of an angel, there’s a fairly abrupt separation or parting of ways. God goes his way and the person at hand goes his or hers. This is fairly subtle but pervasive in most divine encounters intended to show that the two realms are completely opposite each other.

Even though vs. 21 has the Lord establishing a covenant with Isaac, the first response from Abraham after his encounter with the Lord? He “took Ishmael his son and all the slaves born in his house or bought with his money...and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins” [vs. 23]. Abraham is circumcised shortly afterwards and wants to make sure he keeps his part of the covenant. The words “his son” as pertaining to Ishmael, while true, must have troubled Abraham. Here was a semi-legitimate son with the promise, even a name, of a “real” son Sarah is supposed to beget in a year’s time. Abraham figured he might as well make the covenant with Ishmael (after all, he is the first one to receive it) followed by his slaves. Abraham did this “that very day” [vs. 23] or that day when the Lord had spoken with him, not wasting a moment’s time. There must have been some interval of time, however, because the men to be circumcised required being informed as to why it was being carried out. As for Sarah and Hagar, both had mixed thoughts about this as they watched the parade of men come forth for the ceremony. After all, they did not partake of the covenant yet were intimate observers and in many ways more instrumental by reason of their capacity for giving birth. One wonders, too, what Abraham must have thought after he had been circumcised. He fulfilled the covenant. If we read backwards all the way to his departure from Haran, he had done everything the Lord asked of him. Still, the drama has one more part to play out which will occur in the next chapter.

## Chapter Eighteen

“And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day” [vs. 1]. This simple word (‘and’ or *v*) prefaced to the verb *ra’ah* (to see) was noted earlier as an indication of continuous action and here has special meaning for Abraham. It serves to tie in a “seeing” by the Lord, one of a number thus far, with that which the future patriarch has become very familiar. That is to say, his private thoughts, akin to “here-we-are-again-with-another-divine-promise-not-fulfilled,” caught him at a place where he had built an altar to the Lord: “and he came and dwelt

by the oaks of Mamre which are at Hebron" [13.18]. Perhaps by returning to the altar Abraham might renew one of his earlier contacts with the Lord and see what would happen. So here was Abraham sitting at the entrance to his tent staring at the altar with all the earlier memories of divine encounters passing through his mind. Sarah isn't mentioned but was within the tent; undoubtedly she had similar thoughts of past events and was not pregnant despite a divine promise. The two didn't wish to talk with each other, let alone be in each other's presence, hence the separation. Abraham might have quarreled with his wife about all this so decided that the heat outside the tent was better than the heat inside which their argument had produced. Between his building of the altar and the present Abraham had moved about Canaan, sticking pretty close to Mamre; he was almost a hundred years old and not in a position to move about as freely as before. As with earlier appearances, the Lord had to make himself known—seen (*ra'ah*)—quite clearly due to Abraham's failing eyesight. As for the "door," the Hebrew *petach* refers to an entrance and not necessarily a physical door, something not associated with a tent.

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

Vs. 3 follows as part of the previous verse with "My lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant." Abraham uses the singular *'adony* for "lord" despite three men being present. Some Christian commentators say that this applies to the one Lord and three persons of the Trinity but chances are it's due, as noted above, to the time of day when mirages and reality can be confused with reality. While face down on the ground Abraham bids him...them...not to pass by but to stay. In addition to *shachah* as a sign of respect, it might reveal some fear and doubt concerning the three men. Who would be walking in the desert at the hottest time of day? Were they up to no good? Secretly Abraham was wishing the men would pass him by and go somewhere else, but desert hospitality compelled him to act otherwise. To play it safe, Abraham bids his unexpected visitors "to rest under the tree." Sarah was alone inside the tent, and he didn't want her to be exposed to these suspicious men in case they posed a threat. While Abraham busied himself getting some refreshment, he had one ear cocked to the tree in an attempt to listen in on their conversation but to no avail.

They remained silent as where they came from and to where they were going; Abraham complied with their silence and let it go at that. As for his invitation to take some rest, the verb is *sahad* which connotes a propping up or upholding. “You have given me the shield of your salvation and your right hand supported me” [Ps 18.35]. The image fits well, for it’s easy to imagine the three visitors under the tree leaning on their traveling staffs.

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

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

As for this singular lord, he said that he will return in the spring “and Sarah your wife shall have a son” [vs. 10]. The Hebrew for “spring” is *heth chayah*, literally “time of life” or the time when life returns to the earth after the passage of winter and its rains. For Sarah, this phrase intimates more than the coming spring season but the time of birth for her future son so often promised to Abraham by the Lord. This time it was different, a definite time when Sarah will give birth, which was nine months away. However, to the aged Sarah it was long and full of doubt as she “was listening at the tent door behind him” or behind her husband. That means the tent was close to the tree under which

the three visitors had rested and took their meal. “So Sarah laughed to herself” [vs. 12]. The verb is *tsachaq* and reflects the same attitude of Abraham in 17.17: “Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed.” However, it intimates the name of his future son, Isaac. “To her self” is *beqirbah*, literally, “in her midst” or deep within herself. Immediately Sarah adds “shall I have pleasure (*hednah*)?” This is the only form in the Bible yet is related to the proper name Eden, *Heden*.

“The Lord said, ‘Why did Sarah laugh’” [vs. 13]? A matter-of-fact observation which caught both Abraham and Sarah by surprise, for the Lord thought his statement about Sarah giving birth in the “time of life” to be nothing special. Surely Abraham must have sensed Sarah behind the tent veil listening in on the conversation, even having encouraged her to do so when he popped in briefly to ask her to prepare a meal. With the coming darkness of evening, she was more bold, thinking that the twilight would help disguise her presence from the Lord. “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” Here the Lord is addressing himself, again in that matter-of-fact tone of voice. The Hebrew for “hard” is *pala’* or “wonderful,” a verb which connotes something being distinguished from something else by reason of its excellency. “Your love to me was wonderful” [2Sam 1.26].

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

“Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom” [vs. 16]. Not only was Abraham relieved at their departure but so was Sarah after that strange encounter. Once she heard Abraham’s salutations to the men, she knew it was safe to exit the tent and get ready for the night. The verb *qum*, fundamentally as “to arise,” is used for “set out” which was used last in 17.7: “I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants.” Although it doesn’t apply to the situation at hand, the association of *qum* as pertinent to the covenant, so often mentioned with regard to Abraham, does have some significance. With the departure of the mysterious visitors who shift between three persons and one, they are in fact beginning to establish...*qum*...the long-promised covenant. By now it was evening, perhaps on the verge of full night, yet these men had the ability to make their way in darkness. The verb *shaqaph* (looked toward) reveals their determination and often pertains to a looking down or as looking from a window: “Michal the daughter of Saul looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord” [2Sam 6.16]. *Shaqaph* is intensified by the Hebrew for “toward,” *hal peney* (literally, ‘on the face’). Abraham had previous contact with Sodom, rather, the king of that city, who came out with Melchizedek (cf. 14.17). A bit later that king demanded “persons” (vs. 22) but the then called Abram refused. Abraham must have figured something ominous was about to unfold with respect to Sodom and perhaps had in mind the benign and generous king of Salem, Melchizedek whose presence he missed. This may have formed part of their discussion as Abraham “went with them to set them on their way.” They needed guidance to leave the camp area and get on the road to Sodom, this in the twilight hours.

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

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

Vs. 20 continues with the singular Lord speaking within the context of the plural men (vs. 16) and changes tone quite abruptly (it continues into vs. 21): "Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave." This is what the Lord wishes to get off his chest to Abraham, not discussing his descendants, that old and familiar topic which could turn him off because he heard it repeatedly. By bringing up the wickedness of these two cities—and surely Abraham heard about it, even as early as his uneasy encounter with the king of Sodom (14.17)—the Lord wished to bring them before Abraham as a vivid reminder of how his descendants should not comport themselves. This outcry (*zehaqah*) is suggestive of sorrow or the cry for aid, not specifically one demanding retribution. "I cried with a loud and bitter cry" [Est 4.1]. Note that *zehaqah* is not from the cities themselves but against them though the Hebrew lacks a preposition. Since Abraham had been dwelling in Canaan about ten years, he too must have joined in on this *zehaqah*, again having encountered the king of Sodom. As for the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, it is unspecified but apparently was well known. Given the location of both cities close to the lowest place on earth, the *zehaqah* funneled up and spread throughout the surrounding area, reverberating against the mountains. It was not unlike the "smoke of the land that went up like the smoke of a furnace" [19.28] that was to occur shortly. The sin is "very grave," the verb *kavad* (to be heavy) being used. And so the cry which funnels up and spreads around returns down to Sodom and Gomorrah, thereby

compounding the sin. Hence, everyone had a tacit knowledge of what was going on down there at the lowest point of the earth's surface, a fitting image of the underworld.

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

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

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

Abraham now commences his process of bargaining with the Lord over the *tsadyqim* or righteous ones commencing with fifty and ending with ten in vs. 32. Fifty seems a low enough number to start off with: twenty-five for Sodom and twenty-five for Gomorrah. While the text is concerned with the outcry against two cities (cf. vs. 20), throughout the bargaining process one city is mentioned and that isn't specified until vs. 26 as Sodom. Surely Abraham must have had in mind those *tsadyqim* who were subject to the tyrannical rule of their king as intimated in 14.17-24 when he came in contact with

the man himself. Note the position of these supposed *tsadyqim*: first as “within the city” and followed by those “who are in it” [vs. 24]. The first position is *betok* and the second, *qerev*. The former refers to in the middle (not necessarily the geographic center) of something or of persons whereas the latter to in the midst as in the sense of at the heart of something or someone. Thus the fifty *tsadyqim* are in the middle and heart of Sodom (again, Gomorrah not mentioned). Should they be missing, the city has no reason to exist. As for their presence—and this applies to Abraham starting out with fifty *tsadyqim* and ending with ten—the number is less important than the two-fold position. All shouldn’t be thought of as gathered together under one roof but scattered throughout the city unbeknownst to each other. In vs. 24 Sodom is described as a “place” or *maqom* which as noted earlier, is an inhabited area and can extend beyond the city proper to what we’d call today suburbs. As Abraham starts his bargaining process, this larger expanse of territory seems smaller than first glance, i.e., Sodom and satellite areas, and thus a larger population mass.

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

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



Gomorrah.

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

## Chapter Nineteen

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

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

The opening verse now under consideration continues with a second sentence: "When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and bowed himself with his face to the earth." This greeting follows the same as Abraham which opened Chapter Eighteen. Lot being at the gate during the cool evening hours is not unlike the Lord himself who enjoyed taking walks that time in the garden of Eden (cf. 3.8). The city gate was also a place of coming and going, ideal for people-watching and more importantly,

keeping an eye out for any strangers attempting to sneak in before the gates were closed for the night. Lot recognized the two men immediately despite the twilight. It wasn't that he had special foreknowledge of their plan but recognized that they weren't natives and wanted to assist them. After all, Lot was an alien in Sodom which made him more sensitive to how strangers were treated. They would stand out as targets for anyone wishing to take advantage of them. In fact, these men might have news of his long-lost uncle, Abraham, which certainly they did but not news Lot would like to hear.

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

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

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

"Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may know them" [vs. 5].

Not just a few nor even a large crowd came out but the entire city, another sign that Sodom was rotten to the core. Their desire to “know” Lot’s two visitors reflects a desire for homosexual relations, *yadah* often being used within a sexual context. “Adam knew his wife” [4.1]. At last the nature of Sodom’s sin is out in the open, that sin which ascended from the deepest part of the earth to all surrounding areas. For Lot to go outside after having “shut the door behind him” was an incredible act of courage and proof to his visitors that he was prepared to defend them no matter what. If virtually all the inhabitants of Sodom were homosexual, they wouldn’t think twice at Lot inviting two men into his home day or night. What made Lot stand out was that he had two daughters: “Behold, I have two daughters who have not known man” [vs. 8]. Here is another example of *yadah* pertaining to sexual relationship. Lot was desperate saying this, knowing full well that the city’s inhabitants wouldn’t be interested. The same applies to his daughters inside the house; they grew up there and realized, in an odd way, that they were in a safe place, free from molestation, because they were women. So Lot’s offering shouldn’t come as a surprise. Actually, Lot was aggravating the situation. His fellow citizens knew he was a stranger among them, and to offer them two women was a first-class insult. As for the two visitors, Lot pleads for them because they “have come under the shelter of my roof” [vs. 9]. *Tsel* fundamentally means “shadow” here implying that the house is a shadow—a counterpart—of the one who lives there. “Hide me under the shadow of your wings” [Ps 17.8].

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

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

“Have you anyone else here” [vs. 12]? Earlier the men sat down to eat (cf. vs. 3), so everyone in Lot’s

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

down" [Is 29.16]! Presumably that *hyr* or city was in the valley, on the same plain as Sodom, yet sufficiently distant to escape divine wrath. The angel said that he "can do nothing until you arrive there" [vs. 22] meaning that this the last angel with Lot continued to be with him. Later Abraham recounted to him his bargaining with the Lord, of starting with fifty righteous men within Sodom and daring to go as low as ten. One, of course, is the lowest possible, a place to which he dare not go. Neither Lot nor his family fit what would be one of these righteous persons. The Lord spared them, it seemed, out of deference to Abraham and his willingness to engage in such a high stakes bargain.

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

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

Vs. 25 says that not only did the Lord overthrow (*haphak* as in vs. 21) Sodom and Gomorrah but the valley, inhabitants and "what grew on the ground." *Kikar* is the word for "valley" noted in 13.11 as that of the Jordan which had captured the attention of Lot when he separated from Abraham. This word also translates as "plain" and "talent" which was indicated in that context by reason of their roundness. As for any growth associated with the two cities, it was cultivated, not natural, by reason of the barrenness of that area. Surely this incredible noise from heaven woke the inhabitants of Zoar who rushed to the city walls and saw their neighboring larger towns wiped out in two stages. The smoke arising from the *gaphryth* that had been set on fire cast aglow that was blood red because of the rising sun followed quickly by a burning tar stench that filled the valley. While all this was transpiring

Lot must have been frantic about his wife and two daughters. Had they managed to escape to the safety of the hills or were they consumed?

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

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

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

why this smoke is associated with a furnace, *kivshan*. It is found three other times in the Bible, one of which is not entirely unlike the view Abraham had seen: "And Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain quaked greatly" [Ex 19:18]. Here *kivshan* as kiln is similar to that tough coating of baked material that has formed which gives off a burned odor described by the word *qytar*, smoke. Surely Moses had in mind the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah when he recorded his encounter with the Lord on Mount Sinai. No wonder his experience was so terrifying to the Israelites who looked on from the camp below. Like Abraham, Moses had "stood before the Lord" [18:22] and interceded for the Israelites. He too must have been fearful that when he came down from the mountain, only one Israelite would be left and the rest overturned as the two cities. Such a tragedy would be the ultimate triumph for Pharaoh who had persecuted the Israelites.

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

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

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



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

## Chapter Twenty

This chapter parallels that of Chapter Twelve, the 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 503]. With this sense in mind, Abimelech wishes to cover the error he made by taking Sarah—and don’t forget that she was a hundred years old!—against the will of Abraham. Vs. 16 concludes with the king saying “and before every one you are righted,” that is to say, Abraham is *yakach* or shown justice. This verb also means mean to argue or convict, a sense that applies to the verse at hand which works to Abraham’s credit. “There the righteous might dispute with him” [Job 23.7].

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

## Chapter Twenty-One

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

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

was sensitive to the communication she had 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 *yald* 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 *gamal* the verb for "weaned" which fundamentally means to do or give someone anything either good or bad. "He had dealt bountifully with me" [Ps 13.6]. Given Sarah's advanced age, she must have entrusted Isaac to the care of a female slave, not unusual. This verse continues with "Abraham made a great feast," understandably because the child survived the travails of birth, the first few years of life and now stood a greater chance of maturing into adulthood. *Mishteh*, the noun for "feast" which is derived from a verbal root meaning to drink, has obvious connotations. "He made a great feast for all his princes" [Est 1.3]. During this celebration Sarah was sitting there admiring her son Isaac, the center of attention. Then Ishmael came in, perhaps 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 here 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 *‘erets* in which he had sojourned. That land, of course, was Gerar (cf. 20.2) of which Abimelech was king. Abraham had no choice but to comply and says simply, “I will swear” [vs. 24].

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

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

As for the name of that place (*maqom* is used in vs. 31), it’s Beer-sheba or Well of Seven which alternately translates as Well of the Oath due to the word *shavah* used as recently as vs. 23 (‘now therefore swear to me here by God’). *Shavah* also is the verbal root for seven as in vs. 29, the seven



ewe lambs for sacrifice. No small wonder that the well which had been in dispute and apparently had not yet been named now receives a name with the fundamental meaning of “seven” as a sacred number, connoting an oath and the cutting of a covenant. The army commander Phicol was present all along as stated clearly in vs. 32 when he accompanied his king home to the land of the Philistines. An historical footnote: this is the first mention of Philistines who came to Canaan after 1,200 BC. To cap off this most significant event with a native king, Abraham plants a tamarisk tree (*‘eshel*) in Beer-sheba. Only two other references to *‘eshel* are found, both in First Samuel (22.6 & 31.13). The most notable characteristic of a tamarisk tree is that it thrives when cut; the more this is done, the bushier it becomes.

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

## Chapter Twenty-Two

“After these things God tested Abraham.” In many ways this testing (*nasah*) of a one hundred year old man and his wife who left everything to sojourn in a foreign land is outlandish...completely unfair...given all that 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 Mariah as a *maqom* for Abraham's benefit, chances are it was in the evening. During that time the desert heat relinquished its mirages, so one could pick out 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" [Eccl 3.4]. Abraham did this alone all the while recounting the trials, tribulations as well as joys that had taken place within that tent, not to mention the countless places it had been encamped. Abraham would never feel at home in that tent again yet it remained his only link to his wife as well as to Haran, a portable home enlivened in their advanced age by the presence of Isaac.

"And Abraham rose up from before his dead and said to the Hittites" [vs. 3]. This verse indicates that Abraham had exited the tent after an extended period of time during which the natives of the area had gathered. They heard about Sarah's death and wanted to pay their respects. They retained some fear of Abraham after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, he having interceded with God on their behalf but to no avail. If something evil should befall them, they would 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 means 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 *‘erets* (country) and *moledeth* (kindred) show the constancy of Abraham’s attachment over the years to his homeland despite the good reception he had acquired during his stay in the land of Canaan. When considering a sentence like this, a certain latent hostility towards Canaan is discernable, that Abraham was there to do a job and get it done as quickly and effectively as possible. It was up to his son Isaac and succeeding generations to claim Canaan for their very own. They are native-born yet continued the practice of not mingling with the Canaanites, a habit rigorously instilled within them by Abraham. 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 angel s (*mal’ak*) who had met him by the oaks of Mamre (cf. 18.10) who obliged graciously to the request. Then again, that dialogue consisted of three angels becoming one man...a whole series of transformations that lends mystery to the interchange. If it had happened

then, why not now with the servant returning to Haran? Note that the *mal'ak* is to go before the servant, not alongside him as a companion. That makes his task somewhat impersonal yet vital. Though Abraham specifically says that the servant is to take a wife for Isaac, he gives not details how this delicate task is to be effected. That's where the *mal'ak* comes in, working invisibly "before" him. So after the dialogue between Abraham and the servant, the latter puts his hand under his master's thigh to swear an oath. More accurately, he swore "concerning this matter," *davar* being the word for "matter" which, as had been noted earlier, derives from the common verbal root "to speak" and suggests a matter which had been uttered between two people.

"He arose and went to Mesopotamia, to the city of Nahor" [vs, 10]. First these words are preceded by mention of a caravan of twelve camels bearing "choice gifts," no mean amount of presents, which must have attracted plenty of attention both in Canaan and later in Haran. Obviously the presents were from Canaan and perhaps Egypt, things not readily available in that northern territory. 'Aram is the word for Mesopotamia, a proper name first mentioned in 10.22, a son of Shem who, in turn, was one of Noah's sons. That means 'Aram can trace itself all the way back to right after the flood, hence one reason for Abraham's constant affection for that land while he was roaming around in alien Canaan. Since 'Aram was a place colonized shortly after the worldwide disaster, no small wonder Abraham always felt in exile. As for 'Aram itself, it wasn't the servant who picked out that city but the *mala'k* who went before him. While en route there, the servant and *mal'ak* had to pitch tent numerous times. Both never shared the same space, the *mal'ak* always retaining some distance "before" the servant.

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

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

As for the position of the servant and *mala'k*, both were at the spring of water (cf. vs. 13) where he was visible to all the young women drawing water. The *mala'k*, of course, was invisible to these women although they must have taken notice of the stranger in their midst, especially at how he was eyeing them right there in the open. Apparently they weren't afraid but kept up their business of

drawing water. As for the servant, we can detect a certain humor at the way he addresses the Lord: "Behold, I am standing by the spring of water." In other words, the sentiment 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].