

## Chapter Thirteen

“So Abram went up from Egypt...and Lot with him, into the Negeb.” This going-up was an immediate result of Abram having afflicted Pharaoh and his house with unspecified plagues. It was Pharaoh’s agents who carried out his wish, men to whom “he gave orders concerning him” [12.20]. These men didn’t care at all where Abram went, just as long as he left and do so as soon as possible. En route back to the Negeb Abram passed many people who continued to stream into Egypt in search of food as a result of the famine (cf. 12.10). So here we have Abram with his wife and “all that he had” [vs. 1] going in a direction opposite to the throng headed southwest, giving the wrong impression that Egypt was not a land of bounty. Those who saw Abram reasoned, if that fellow made out so well, why not us? They mistook the favor Pharaoh showed Abram not out of respect but out of lust for his wife, Sarai. Such misinformation travels quickly, so most people on the trek to Egypt got wind of it, and Abram did his best cautioning against getting their hope up beyond expectation. In this opening verse to Chapter Thirteen Lot is mentioned for the first time since 12.5, that is, in the land of Canaan. Somewhere in that land the two split up for reasons which have gone unrecorded, perhaps because the land couldn’t support them as noted in vs. 6. Vs. 1 implies that Lot had continued with Abram from Canaan through the Negeb and into Egypt. However, Lot could have stopped somewhere along the line and awaited his uncle’s return. If Abram didn’t come back from Egypt, Lot would go down after him.

Vs. 2 briefly describes Abram’s retinue which he took from Egypt as “very rich in cattle, silver and gold,” a comparison not unlike that of the Israelites at the time of the Exodus: “For they had asked of the Egyptians jewelry of silver and of gold and clothing” [Ex 12.35]. Abram must have obtained these items in Egypt instead of bringing them because the text doesn’t speak of what he brought there, just what he brought to Canaan, “all their possessions which they had gathered” [12.5]. Because of the famine, their possessions dwindled quickly either by having consumed them or by selling them off. As for Egypt, the Lord doesn’t direct Abram to that country specifically but to “the land that I will show you” [12.1]. This showing is a continuous one which started off well for Abram and his retinue until they arrived at “Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning” [vs. 3], a place he naturally thought of as his final destination. It was, but considerable more traveling was in store for him. Bethel or House of God was mentioned in 12.8, so it was an obvious place—*maqom*—for Abram to aim for as the land which had been promised. It was here, the second time around at the same *maqom*, that Abram “called on the name of the Lord” or at the altar he built during his first visit. Though Abram lacked clear-cut confirmation that this was the place for him to settle, he recalled the Lord’s words in 12.7 (‘to your descendants I will give this land’). Despite erection of an altar, no response came from God; besides, a famine was raging, so he had no choice but pick up and leave. This came as a disappointment after having made his way from Haran and having heard the Lord say that this—Canaan—was the place destined for him.

Vs. 5 again mentions Lot who was wealthy though in a way different from Abram, wealthy in terms of “flocks, herds and tents.” Addition of tents suggests that Lot was of a more nomadic cast than his uncle even though both came from the same background. Besides, Lot was much younger and therefore more mobile. The great wealth put in nomadic terms is why the land could not support them both “dwelling together” [vs. 6]. Their relationship was not unlike the nomadic Abel and the stationary Cain. While Abram and Lot didn’t come to blows, their different ways of life required splitting up despite having come all the way from Haran to Canaan to the Negeb to Egypt and from Egypt to the Negeb and finally, to Canaan. Surely Abram and Lot had ample time to size each other up. However, they came to this decision only after having completed a hazardous journey along with their respective households. There was nothing at fault with the land which “could not support both of them dwelling together.” Each man had vast possessions, so a decision had to be made else that famine which they escaped by fleeing into Egypt would catch up with them. This tension is revealed in vs. 7 where strife existed “between the herdsmen of Abram’s cattle and the herdsmen of Lot’s cattle.” *Ryv* is the word for strife or contention though it doesn’t apply to an especially violent conflict. “You delivered me from strife with the people” [Ps 18.43]. Mention of the word “cattle” suggests this *ryv* was over water and grazing rights, fairly typical for nomadic people in the desert. The second sentence of vs. 7 mirrors 12.6 reading “At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites dwelt in the land.” Addition of these two native peoples suggests that the herdsmen came into conflict with them over means of sustaining their herds of cattle. So if *ryv* existed between Abram and Lot, the external threaten from these native inhabitants threatened their very existence.

To avoid the *ryv* just mentioned and not allow the Canaanites and Perizzites to take advantage of it, Abram demonstrates his grasp of the situation in vs. 8: “Let there be no contention between you and me...for we are kinsmen.” The Hebrew for “kinsmen” reads here literally as “men brothers we are.” Abram is shrewd enough to set Lot on his way, trusting in the original divine summons to leave his native land. That would free him up considerably, a sentiment he’d never let Lot know about. “Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me” [vs. 9]. Even these words have an air of artificiality about them, of trying to pull the wool over Lot’s eyes. Both had the opportunity to explore Canaan en route to the Negeb as well as upon their return from Egypt, so they had a pretty good idea of what it was like. Thus the separation or *parad* either to the left of to the right as Abram proposed was of a much lesser degree from that *parad* of 10.32 after the flood: “and from these the nations spread abroad on the earth.” Chances are the families of each man had no say in the matter and kept apart...*parad*...from each other, including the herdsmen whose task was tending after the mobile wealth of their masters. They plus their masters couldn’t help but recall that *parad* which later gave rise to the city in the land of Shinar and the tower of Babel. If this got out of hand, they would continue the division of tongues and peoples that has plagued us for so long.

“And Lot lifted up his eyes and saw that the Jordan valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord” [vs. 10]. The lifting up of eyes in this instance implies that Lot had

been downcast and worried about the conflict between his herdsmen and those of Abram (cf. vs. 14, the same regarding Abram). Both were trying their best to work out a deal when suddenly he beheld the Jordan valley stretching out before him. Surely Lot was aware of this beforehand, had his eyes on it, so jumped at the chance of settling there. The Hebrew for “valley” is *kikar*, more a tract of land roughly circular in shape; perhaps the term “valley” was applied due to its bowl-like nature which encircled the land about it. “Talent” is another translation for *kikar* due to its circular shape. “In the plain of Jordan” [2Chron 4.17] (NB: often *kikar* means both ‘valley’ and ‘plain’ due more to the territory both places encompass). Lot was attracted to the *kikar* of the Jordan with Jericho being the chief city, an ideal choice, really. This area reminded Lot of the “garden of the Lord” which means Eden. That image endured the first man’s expulsion, the growing corruption upon the earth, the worldwide flood, confusion of a single language and finally a dispersal of people throughout the world. It was handed down in oral fashion yet retained its strength despite the passage of time. That’s because it was transmitted from one person to another, not written and therefore not personal. In addition to the Eden comparison, there is one based upon very recent experience, “like the land of Egypt” which means the Nile River. We don’t have explicit mention of Lot having accompanied Abram there, but that isn’t the issue because Abram could have related his experiences at a later time. So despite the promising sight which lay open to Lot, vs. 10 qualifies it with a premonition of the future: “this was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.” *Shachat* is the verb which also means to act wickedly, the same used in 6.13: “I have determined to make an end of all flesh.” And so the worldwide *shachat* applied to one of a lesser though even more violent scale, the two cities and surrounding areas. As for Sodom and Gomorrah, they were already in place prior to Lot’s acquisition of that territory, and word must have reached him about the horrors that went on there.

With reports about Sodom and Gomorrah in mind, Abram got the better deal who “dwelt in the land of Canaan” [vs. 12]. Stories about them proved true because after Lot “moved his tent as far as Sodom,” the next verse says “that the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord.” The verb *’ahal* (‘moved his tent;’ only two other references to it) means that Lot didn’t dwell in Sodom but *had* Sodom, that preposition signifying “to,” “right up to” it without entering the city. Early on Lot got wind of the wickedness going on there though it remains unspecified; this is another example of how quickly news spread in a city where oral transmission of information was paramount. Furthermore, only Sodom is mentioned, not Gomorrah, which may at the time had been the lesser of the two evils. As for *’ahal*, it was only natural for Lot to pitch tent since he had “flocks and herds and tents” [vs. 5] whereas tents aren’t attributed to Abram. Despite Lot’s proximity to cities, he retained a nomadic-like lifestyle due not just to his upbringing but out of safety concerns. At any time the native inhabitants could have risen upon against Lot and overpowered him as well as Abram. Perhaps Lot had a premonition that the Lord would destroy Sodom and Gomorrah (he’d have a role though yet was unaware of it) so he wanted to be ready to move out at a moment’s notice. In this Lot may have thought of Noah who knew the worldwide flood was coming and had to prepare an exit strategy.

Vs. 14 has the Lord speaking to Abram for the first time since 12.1 when he ordered him to leave his native land of Haran (12.7 has the Lord appearing to Abram), so the intervening time included his migration to Canaan, the Negeb, Egypt and back into Canaan. It was a fairly long interval so Abram welcomed the divine intervention. Note that on this second occasion the Lord speaks only after Lot “had separated (*parad*; cf. vs. 9) from him.” In other words, Abram willingly allowed Lot to take what seemed the more welcome, fertile valley of the Jordan River trusting that the Lord would speak with him shortly. As for Lot, he was delighted at apparently come off the better. At the same time Abram was curious when his nephew descended to the Jordan area and wanted to see if the Lord would provide for him...a sort of comparison between the two men and their retinues. “Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are.” This lifting up of Abram’s eyes differs from Lot (‘and Lot lifted up his eyes’ to see the Jordan River area, vs. 10) in that it was divinely commanded. The place (*maqom*) at hand is where Abram “had made an altar at the first” [vs. 13] or Shechem, the oak of Moreh (12.6). It was here that Abram and Lot had their quarrel and decided to separate from each other.

At this *maqom* situated in Shechem by the oak of Moreh the Lord had Abram look to all four points of the compass. From this central point or point within a square which was determined by Abram’s clear-sightedness he said in vs. 15 “for all the land which you see I will give to you and to your descendants forever.” As noted with regard to 12.7, *zerah* for “descendants” translates literally as seed, that Abram is planting the land not for himself but for the future. In the next verse this seed will be “as the dust of the earth,” *haphar* being the word for “dust,” a fine powdery substance compared with the more substantial ‘*adamah*’ of which Adam was fashioned. “Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground” [2.7]. Note that *haphar* can be compared with sand in 22.17 regarding these descendants. However, *haphar* suggests the forming of a new man in terms of a new nation, not an individual person. Abram’s descendants put in terms of this powdery substance, destined to inhabit the land which Abram now is gazing upon, always will refer back to that moment to establish their identity. By so doing, this dust which cannot be counted (cf. vs. 16) becomes unified despite any separation marked in terms of distance of time.

“Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you” [vs. 18]. The Lord bids Abram to arise, implying that he was laying on the ground out of reverence and gratitude, even with disbelief at the words that had been addressed to him because they were too wonderful to be true. So instead of the Lord asking Abram to just look as in vss. 14 & 15, he tells him to actually walk (*halak*) through this *‘erets*. Walking was very familiar to him, having come on foot from Haran into Egypt and back into Canaan. Abram didn’t have to walk physically but in his spirit (cf. vs. 18 below) as the Lord bade him to look and follows the length and breadth which the Lord had laid out. He began this journey in spirit from the point in which he was, the oak of Moreh at Shechem. In other words, this oak tree was the axis point from which the land would be inhabited. While reconnoitering of the land sounds

fine, Abram had to pass a number of Canaanites and Perizzites who “dwelt in the land” [vs. 7], a bit unnerving despite the divine promise.

The text does not say explicitly that Abram walked through the land, for vs. 18 or end of Chapter Thirteen concludes with “So Abram moved his tent and came and dwelt by the oaks of Mamre which are at Hebron.” In other words, the way Abram effects reconnoitering is by moving from the oak (*élon*) of Moreh at Shechem to the *élon*ey (plural, oaks) at Hebron, a short distant and easy to accomplish. So despite the move, Abram chose to live by *élon*, a symbol of strength and sturdiness and also reminiscent of the garden of Eden. “There (*sham*) he built an altar to the Lord,” this being the third altar Abram had constructed. Nothing is said about sacrifices offered on all three, suggesting that they were more as memorials for the Lord’s appearance and promise. They were practice-runs, if you will, for the one later in 22.9 when Abraham (he name was changed later) was prepared to sacrifice his son, Isaac.

## Chapter Fourteen

This chapter recounts an alliance of four kings against Abram as well as presenting us with a whole series of kings and their wars up until vs. 11 when four of them (noted in vs. 9) “took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their provisions and went their way.” The noun “goods” (*rekush*) was mentioned in 12.5 with respect to Abram’s possessions which he took from Haran into Canaan and suggests, as 2Chron 21.14 reads, that which is most valuable to an individual or a group: “The Lord will bring a great plague on your people, your children, you wives and all your possessions.” And so to lose *rekush* is equivalent of losing one’s livelihood. The places from which *rekush* were taken are Sodom and Gomorrah which gets automatically gets one’s attention due to the disaster that will overtake both. 13.13 gave a premonition of this: “Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord.” Did the four kings pillage them because of this sordid reputation? Possibly not; they were more interested in booty and captives instead of taking vengeance upon two cities renowned for their immoral customs and behavior. This sack took place just after the four kings drove those of Sodom and Gomorrah into the Valley of Siddim where they fell into bitumen pits (cf. vs. 10). With their leaders out of the way, the cities were more vulnerable than ever. Nothing is said about leveling the two cities, just that the kings “went their way.” While their only desire was for booty, they knew from previous contact with the cities that the wickedness in them was so great only some divine power could bring this to a final resolution. This incident is noteworthy by reason of the four kings having taken Lot. Vs. 12 also mentions the *rekush* belonging to him which must have been substantial going all the way back to his departure with Abram from Haran (cf. 12.4). Not only that, Lot’s *rekush*—especially in the form of herds of animals—increased further in Canaan which is why his herdsmen and those of Abram quarreled which forced their separation. Surely the four kings knew of these two strangers in the land of Canaan wandering about with such an abundance of possessions. Perhaps rumor of Lot dwelling in Sodom motivated them to attack the city. As for Lot choosing Sodom, infamous not so much in wickedness but in

sexual deviation, there's not explicit reason to associate him with that city. Lot opted for the Jordan valley which meant he descended close to the lowest place on the earth, a hostile environment whose border was the Dead or Salt Sea, and Sodom (as well as Gomorrah) were the two largest cities there, a natural place to make his base. He used them to explore the territory, still mobile as 13.12 intimates: "and moved his tent as far as Sodom." Mention of tent suggests that Lot was dwelling "as far as Sodom," not necessarily within that city's walls. Besides, nothing in Genesis is said that would implicate Lot by reason of his actions or character. He happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Word of Lot's capture reached his uncle Abram through "one who had escaped" [vs. 13]. Abram is described here as "the Hebrew," a word prefiguring the future inhabitants of Canaan, those who had sprung from Abram. Actually this is the very first mention of "Hebrew" which we've taken as synonymous with that area even though the current time frame is well before that future period. The person who was fortunate to have escaped the four kings was part of Lot's *rekush*, for that word can apply to humans as well as animals, etc. Despite being among foreigners—the retinue of Lot and by implication, Abram—he heard them both talk of their adventures all the way back to Haran, then Canaan followed by Egypt and back into Canaan. As it became known later, to be a Hebrew means to be one who has crossed over, *havar* being the verbal root. In the case at hand, that crossing-over intimates Abram and Lot's *havar* from Haran which had its origin in a divine summons. This person luck enough to have escaped came to Abram "who was living by the oaks of Mamre" [vs 13] which at first glance seems like the place where he had moved his tent after separating from Lot (cf. 13.18). However, now Mamre is transformed into a person, "the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and of Aner" [vs. 13].

How did this transition from a place to a person take place? The answer is easy because 13.18 (Mamre as a place) is associated with Abram's building of an altar to the Lord, this after he had walked throughout the land the Lord was about to give him. Association of Mamre with Abram's reconnoitering of Canaan and the altar suffice to transform Mamre not just into a person but into an ally. After all, the Lord said he would give the land to Abram and his descendants. If this were true, why not change Mamre from a place (and place as noted earlier in the sense of *maqom* as a place of habitation) into a human being? It was in accord with the divine promise and thus an easy task to accomplish. Word of this remarkable transition got out quickly, even to the person who had escaped the clutches of the four kings, and he knew whom to go. It was not unusual among the human *rekush* of Lot to be privy to such things, especially in a mobile or semi-nomadic society where it's virtually impossible to keep a secret. And so the escapee made his or her way all the way up from the lowest point on earth to Abram, an uphill climb all the way. As for the now-human Mamre and his two brothers (Eshcol and Aner), they were natural allies of Abram, partaking, if you will, of that altar where he had built in 13.18. To have such men aligned with Abram makes him virtually invincible by reason of the Lord having transformed Mamre from a place into a person. The word "ally" in Hebrew runs here as "masters of a covenant-Abram," the two key words being *bahal* and *beryth* (covenant was last noted in

9.15 as a rainbow but not yet associated with Abram). It should be noted that this is the only occasion where *bahal* is used as ally; the usual meaning is either husband or master as in Prov 12.4: “A good wife is the crown of her husband.”

“When Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men who had been born in his house” [vs. 14]. *Ruq* is the verb for “led forth” which means to be empty, pour (lead) out: “I will draw my sword” [Ex 15.9]. Abram doesn’t simply muster an army but empties it out onto the field in one sudden rush of attack as the verb implies. As for those he had mustered, they are *chanyk*—trained or dedicated for a given purpose—this being the only adjective in the Bible derived from the verbal root *chanak*, to dedicate: “So the king (Solomon) dedicated the house of the Lord” [2Kg 8.63]. The men who have been dedicated fits in well with that altar of Mamre in 13.18 which presumably had been dedicated. The text doesn’t say that Mamre the Amorite as well as Eshcol and Aner (i.e., the allies) were among the “dedicated” men who were “born in his house” and numbering three hundred and eighteen. “Born in his house” is a way of saying the men were either family members or part of that *rekush* or possessions belonging to Abram. First and foremost was that escapee who wanted just as much revenge upon the captors of Lot, and he knew the direction they had taken, Dan.

Despite the small number of soldiers (three hundred and eighteen of them), Abram divided them in half and did so “by night” [vs. 15] or literally, “divided upon them at night.” That is to say, Abram choose the cover of darkness to make this *chalaq* (division) to protect against the enemy who might be spying as well as any local Canaanite informer. No artificial light was required, for the single-mindedness of the *chanyk* or dedicated men offered sufficient illumination. The verb *chalaq* intimates the casting of lots by smooth stones to make the proper choice, so the choice was made by feel of these stones. It was an easy task, really, for those under Abram’s command were *chanyk*—dedicated—and had one goal in mind, to rescue Lot. As for the results of this *chalaq*, both divisions comprising one hundred and fifty-nine men were unaware of it until dawn. When night had passed, they were at their commander’s bidding for a two-pronged attack. So despite the smallness of these forces confronting a much larger army, Abram was able to effect a defeat just as impressive as Gideon’s in Judges 7. Surely Gideon had in mind his illustrious predecessor when confronting Midian. It should be noted that *chalaq* wasn’t done by Abram alone but together with “his servants” who were privy to their master’s intent. These servants were close to the people, a kind of intermediary, and thus had a better idea of how they felt about a daring rescue mission. Once this important step had been taken, Abram “routed them (i.e., King Chedorlaomer and his associates) and pursued them to Hobah, north of Damascus.” Nothing is said about this battle, of how one of Abram’s servants had rescued Lot except that it happened, bringing him home along with “his goods (*rekush* as noted in vs. 12 above) and the women and the people” [vs. 16]. Additional mention of “women and people” suggests more than *rekush* had been taken and reported by the escapee in vs. 13. Lot’s fate would have become obvious in a short time because Abram would not have heard anything from these two groups.

Such are The opening words of vs. 17 are “After his return” meaning the oaks of Mamre of 13.18 which, as had been noted in vs. 13, had undergone a transformation into Mamre the Amorite. And so Abram returned to that place where at the Lord’s bidding he had walked through the length and breadth of the land (cf. 13.17). It wasn’t his yet—the same can be argued regard the oaks of Mamre—for Abram was still a stranger among the Canaanites. As for Lot, nothing is said of him after Abram had rescued him nor do we know specifically where he went. He seems to have passed off the scene unceremoniously to somewhere in the “cities of the valley” [13.12] near Sodom where we find him later at the beginning of Chapter Nineteen. Until then attention is focused upon Abram.

“The king of Sodom went out to meet him (Abram) at the Valley of Shaveh.” The name of this king isn’t given, perhaps out of embarrassment, because “the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord” [13.13]. Still, the king was eager to find about this renowned foreigner, Abram, and taken Lot back under his wing (cf. 13.12). It must have been difficult negotiating with such a person whose city, along with Gomorrah, soon would be obliterated. Then again, Abram wondered if his expedition to rescue his nephew had been worth the risk since Lot was returning to a place known for its way of life. Perhaps Abram had in mind a temporary truce with this king of Sodom...entrust Lot to his protection and rescue him at a later time. That’s what happened, at least in essence, through the mysterious visitors to Abram who moved on to Sodom. As for the Valley of Shaveh or the King’s Valley, that is mentioned in 2Kg 18.18 where David’s son, Absalom, erected a pillar or a memorial in his name.

There is a redeeming aspect to this rescue of Lot and handing him over to the king of Sodom through the medium of Melchizedek, king of Salem who “brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God the Most High” [vs. 18]. As his very name intimates (‘righteousness is my king’), Melchizedek is very different from the anonymous king of Sodom, being a priest (*kohen*) besides. This is the first mention of “priest” in the Bible, and Melchizedek is an archetype of priests that will follow in his footsteps. Not only was Melchizedek a priest but was one of “God the Most High (*helyon*).” He received this honor from the Lord which was included in the land of Canaan set aside for Abram. If the Lord can make Canaan as Abram’s future inheritance, it’s just as easy for him to insert only one king who held righteousness in high regard and who would recognized Abram as the future inheritor. Thus Melchizedek is similar to Enoch and Noah before him, two men singled out for having walked with God while the multitude among which they had lived hadn’t a clue as to what was going on. The Epistle to the Hebrews puts this divine walking in terms not dissimilar to that theme: “He is without father or mother or genealogy, and has neither beginning of days nor end of life” [7.3]. By comparison, the king of Sodom brought no offering to Abram; he could have been a priest but certainly not of God Most High, given the already tarnished reputation of his city. Salem refers to *shalom* or peace and refers to the future Jerusalem where Melchizedek reigned. Surely from that high vantage point he and his subjects were able to witness the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah that was to



come. The offerings of Melchizedek (bread and wine) are modest but significant insofar as they are representative of that the fruit of that land Abram was to inherit, especially Salem which later would become so important.

In vss. 19-20 the king/priest Melchizedek blessed (*barak*; cf. 9.1 where God blesses Noah and his sons) Abram and does so by “God Most High, maker of heaven and earth.” This short but significant *barak* has the preposition *l* prefaced to “God.” That is to say, it reads literally “to God,” that Abram is “to” him, a direct relationship with God, the first divine relationship acknowledged by a person. Despite the summons to leave his native Haran, take the journey into Canaan and then unexpectedly flee into Egypt and back to Canaan, Abram received no confirmation from a fellow human being about this mission. That means Abram had to live by the initial divine summons even though it was re-confirmed while in Canaan. How does Abram share this...or can he? Is there anyone among his family who can comprehend his actions such as erecting an altar? And so Abram is not unlike his predecessor Noah who pretty much kept to himself. The person closest to him is his nephew Lot though he emerges more as an opportunist or hanger-on to Abram than anything else. Even his first rescue just recounted and his more dramatic one from Sodom later on isn’t especially flattering.

Returning to the blessing of vs. 19, we have for “maker” (of heaven and earth) the verb *qanah* which more fundamentally means to acquire, to purchase, as noted earlier with reference to the proper name Cain. In the verse at hand, *qanah* implies that God had acquired heaven and earth meaning that it pre-existed or was just as eternal as he and thus sharing in some type of divine life. It’s a sentiment not entirely unlike the Spirit hovering over the waters in the opening verses of Genesis discussed in that context. We can expect someone like Melchizedek and his predecessors to have an idea like this, quite in line with a proper understanding of the biblical divinity for a person; he and they had lived in relative isolation yet kept the primeval understanding of God alive throughout so many generations. While Melchizedek lacks genealogy (cf. Heb 7.3 already cited), definitely he is a descendant from one of Noah’s three sons and had maintained some semblance of the Lord with whom Noah had walked. That means his descendants going back that far managed to keep alive a spark of divine awareness. Just the fact that human relations with God became so problematic due to the increase of sin and corruption is a sad commentary on the state of affairs in which Abram found himself. At the same time this narrow focus upon a single individual here and there within Genesis is exciting, the reason why it captures our attention.

The second half of Melchizedek’s blessing is a reminder to Abram not to glory in his recent triumph of having rescued Lot but to attribute it to the Lord: “Blessed be God Most High who has delivered your enemies into your hand!” *Magan* is the verb for “deliver” which occurs two other times in the Bible, Prov 4.9 and Hos 11.8; from it is derived the noun “shield.” In the context at hand Melchizedek wishes Abram to acknowledge that God had acted as his shield...perhaps not so much to destroy his enemies but to protect him from

them which accounts for the lack of details concerning how Abram got Lot (i.e., by not slaying his captors). That would tie in nicely with Abram's earlier division of his forces into two parties, a division that took place deliberately at night or in secret. In sum, Abram would snatch Lot away under cover of darkness with his captors being unaware of what had transpired.

Abram's meeting with Melchizedek took place with the intent of handing over Lot to the jurisdiction of the king of Sodom in whose territory he had resided (cf. 13.12). Once Abram gave him a tenth of his possessions—and this was no mean sum chiefly consisting of animals and perhaps slaves—Melchizedek was overstepped by the king who was observing closely the blessing just pronounced. He intervenes with “Give me the persons but take the goods for yourself” [vs. 21]. Melchizedek is forced out of the picture by the king who demanded Abram's possessions or *rekush* noted in vs. 12: “they also took Lot...and his goods and departed.” As for the word “persons,” the Hebrew has *nephesh* or literally, “soul” which pertains to breath, a fact noted earlier in this document. And so we see a distinction here, one not found in vs. 12, between *rekush* and persons. This king wanted human beings, not *rekush*, to bring back to Sodom for reasons all too easily associated with the name of the city. Since he had the power to do what he wanted and Melchizedek was unable to counter him, the situation became tense very quickly. Melchizedek didn't want to do the king's bidding, trying his best to prevent the handover of these persons...*nephesh*...into his possession. Because *nephesh* implies the very essence of a person, the king wanted to put his intended prey totally under his control and his alone. By saying to Abram that the Lord “has delivered your enemies into your hand,” he was hoping that Abram would get the hint, that one of these enemies was the king of Sodom, a man never to be trusted.

So here we have Melchizedek and the king of Sodom, two diametrically opposed characters, coming out to meet Abram, each with a different purpose. Melchizedek takes the initiative by pronouncing his blessing, thereby hoping to work in Abram's favor. Although his words sounded noble in comparison with the king, his offerings of bread and wine must have looked pathetic to such an ignominious character. Both the blessing and offering didn't work because the king of Sodom had his mind set on taking *nephesh*, not *rekush*. Then we have Lot who remains silent awaiting the fate that will be meted out to him shortly. Vss. 22-23 break the tension of this short but tense situation, a struggle between Abram and a less than desirable representative of the land he had entered and was destined to inherit. Abram says to the king of Sodom with confidence, most likely emboldened by his recent expedition to rescue his nephew, Lot, “I have sworn to the Lord God Most High, maker of heaven and earth.” The verb for “sworn” is *rum* which fundamentally means to exalt, lift up, and here pertains to the lifting up of Abram's hands in worship. “I have lifted up my voice and cried” [39.15]. That is to say, Abram lifts up his hands to the “acquirer (*qanah*) of heaven and earth,” this word being used by Melchizedek in his blessing.

The *rum* Abram speaks of boldly to the king of Sodom consists of “not taking a thread or a sandal-thong or anything that is your, lest you should say, ‘I have made Abram rich’” [vs. 23].

Thus Abram pronounces his independence from the king and continues in vs. 25 by saying “I will take nothing but what the young men have eaten and the share of the men who went with me.” Abram generously offers Aner, Eschol and Mamre—allies who helped him re-take Lot (cf. vs. 13)—to take their share as well. *Cheleq* is the word for “share” which is derived from *chalaq* as noted in vs. 15, the dividing of Abram’s forces at night into two parts. This is a shrewd move insofar as it demonstrates Abram’s disinclination to associate with the native Canaanites more than necessary. Once their assistance has run its course, it is time to move on and get busy with the real task at hand, obtaining the land, the subject of the next chapter. As for these two concluding verses of Chapter Fourteen, we’re left with no explicit resolution of the tension between the king of Sodom, Melchizedek, Lot and Abram. While of no small importance, this incident pales in comparison to the importance of the divine covenant made with Abram in Chapter Fifteen. The only value it has—and this makes Lot out to be a kind of hapless individual not entirely unlike Noah’s sons—is the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as representing divine judgment upon humankind.

## Chapter Fifteen

NB: In Chapters One through Six the Hebrew term *va-yah* was inserted after each paragraph. Originally intended as a liturgical pause, it is used in this document to indicate a period of rest, of putting down the text (both Genesis and these notations). This gesture does not signify a time for reflection, beneficial as it may be, but for resting in God’s presence. Although *va-yah* was discontinued after Chapter Six, a note there stated that its spirit is to be continued throughout the rest of these notations. In brief, this paragraph is a reminder of the value of *va-yah* without which this text would be of no value. *va-yah* had been used in the early chapters simply to acclimatize the reader as to the importance it signifies.

“After these things” are the opening words of this chapter and refer to the more immediate events of Abram’s rescue of his nephew, Lot, and his interaction with both the king of Sodom and Melchizedek of Salem. The Hebrew for “things” is *davar* or word and can read “after these words (which had been spoken).” Certainly a lot had been “spoken” in Chapter Fourteen and much more will continue to be spoken as God is about to make a covenant with Abram at the end of this chapter.

“The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision.” That is to say, the divine *davar* came to Abram “after these *devarym* (plural for *davar*)” or “after these words.” Thus we have a close connection between “things” or events and the word which the Lord speaks. While *devarym* are in the past, they are not as far as God is concerned, for his *davar* transcends temporal measurement. A word is something heard whereas here the divine *davar* comes to Abram (the verb ‘to be’ is used) in a vision or in a *machazeh*. Two other uses of this word are found, Num 24.4 and Ezk 13.7, the former being cited here: “the oracle of him (Balaam) who hears the words of God, who sees the vision of the Almighty.” The verbal root (a more common noun for ‘vision’ exists) is *chazah* which means to see in the sense of behold or take in at a single glance and thus applies to prophetic vision. As in the case at hand, we

have two senses working together: that of speaking (*davar*) and that of hearing (*chazah*). The sense of speaking is expressed through the sense of hearing, not the other way around. Verse one has the first vision (*machazeh* or otherwise) in the Bible even though the Lord had appeared to Abram as in 12.7. Before that, we have no instances of a person seeing God. The chief way of communicating with God is of walking with him, the archetypes being Enoch and Noah. Even back in the garden of Eden the relationship with God isn't put in terms of sight but words. For example, the dialogue between the Lord and the first man and woman is couched in terms of speaking-without-sight. This approach may be unfamiliar with English or readers of modern languages in general, but Hebrew stresses sound and therefore speaking over sight and vision.

The opening verse to the current chapter concludes with "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." There is reason for Abram to fear...who wouldn't be afraid of a *davar* or word making its presence felt through a vision or *machazeh*? Really, this is extraordinary for one sense-based communication put in terms of another, the first time it has occurred in history. Thus the Lord acting as Abram's shield or protection is the way he compensates for Abram's natural fear of how these two senses interact. Immediately afterwards the Lord speaks of Abram's reward or *sakar* whose verbal root (same spelling) applies to hiring. Another noun derived from *sakar* is "wages" which backs up this notion of hiring, and hiring involves paying another person to do work, often work which one cannot or doesn't want to do himself. In a sense, the Lord "hires" himself out to Abram; mention of "shield" with its military associations can mean this *sakar* by the Lord will take the form of protection against the likes of the king of Sodom and the Canaanites among whom Abram was living somewhat tenuously. Also, the notion behind *sakar* as hiring-out may apply to the Lord having hired Abram to make the trek from Haran to Canaan with an unintended trip to Egypt. In this way the Lord was employing Abram as a scout for future control of the land in which he found himself. Surely Mamre the Amorite, along with Eshcol and Aner (cf. 14.13), allies of Abram whom he may have hired, would understand the content of this vision.

"But Abram said." Such are the opening words of vs. 2. That is to say, Abram employs speech in order to respond to this extraordinary divine communication put in terms of two senses interacting with each other. Usually when a person speaks we expect the recipient of his words to be present, but such has not be the case thus far concerning God's interactions with human beings. This apparently one-way speaking may seem odd to modern sensibility, but reading these interactions in the Hebrew text preclude any such difficulties. There it is perfectly natural not to think in terms of a person being the object of someone's speech as here between Abram and the Lord. It's something the reader must do; get into the text and see what happens. That's what Moses, author of Genesis would wish for us. Abram's first words to the Lord are "What will you give me?" He is thinking of both the Lord as shield and his own *sakar* or reward. Interestingly, Abram has in mind having a child with his wife, Sarai. It's the first time we know this fact after both have left Haran. Was Abram aware of Sarai's infertility before their departure or en route to Canaan and later to Egypt followed by a

return to Canaan where he finds himself at present? The words “I continue childless” are revealing. That is to say, the verb *halak* (to go) is coupled with “childless” or *haryry* (from the root *harar*). Three other references are found in the Bible. For Abram (and Sarai) to “go childless” means that they’ve been carrying...walking (*halak*)...with this affliction for a long time. After all, it’s the first thing Abram blurts out to the Lord. Being childless was considered one of the worst of all afflictions for ancients, and it was compounded by Abram’s presence in an alien land. While all those around him were flourishing, here he was, advanced in age with his barren wife wandering all over the place. In view of this plight, the Lord saying to him that his reward “shall be very great” sounds cruel: more so because these two words read literally “great excessively (*me’od*).” In other words, Abram won’t even begin to comprehend the divine reward. Surely this communication took place well out of sight from Sarai. For her to hear her husband express himself like this and without being able to hear what God communicated to him would be too much for her. Easily she could have died on the spot, so Abram had to be very delicate in this situation, keeping his dealing with God hidden from her.

Abram reveals the true plight of his predicament when saying that the only heir of his house is Eliezer of Damascus. That is to say, Eliezer (the first and only time he is mentioned) is part of Abram’s retinue whom he picked up either en route from Haran or passing by the vicinity of Damascus en route to Canaan which doesn’t alter the fact that this man is said to have been born in Abram’s house (cf. vs. 2). Regardless, Eliezer became the most trusted confidant of Abram else he wouldn’t be in the position of becoming his heir...which doesn’t say much of Abram’s retinue taken from Haran. Despite his high esteem, he was not family; if Abram’s inheritance were to slip into Eliezer’s hands, who knows what would happen to Sarai and those in his retinue. After all, this drama takes place in the midst of an alien (Canaanite) population. Even worse, if the king of Sodom had gotten wind of this, he might return in force demanding persons instead of goods (cf. 14.21). As for the word “heir” used here, it is *mesheq*, the only use in the Bible. While the origin is uncertain, this noun forms the essence of the proper name “Damascus” (*Damesheq*). With regard to the words “in my house (*bayith*),” this refers not so much to a physical dwelling but to one’s heritage. *Bayith* itaken literally wouldn’t apply to Abram noted up to this point for his wandering.

“And Abram said.” Words which introduce vs. 2 as well as vs. 3 where Abram is speaking to the Lord with some desperation about Sarai’s barrenness and the potential of Eliezer gaining his inheritance. This desperation is compounded by the word “behold” or *hen* which intimates a sentiment something like “look at how desperate I am in this foreign land made worse by the fact that a foreigner will inherit everything I had brought from Haran.” This is borne out by Abram saying that the Lord has given him no offspring or *zerah* (i.e., seed) which had been promised before Abram descended into Egypt, 12.7. And that promise was in the larger context of the Canaanites being in the land, vs. 6. By reminding the Lord of his promise explicitly given, Abram was prodding him to make Sarai fertile. Even though Lot was somewhere in the Jordan valley close to Sodom, he must have gotten wind of this and perhaps entertained the notion of becoming Abram’s heir, that is, provided that Eliezer

could be removed discreetly. Although Abram came this far, he shouldn't complain; at least Eliezer, despite the lowliness of being a slave and had the prospect of being exalted, belonged to Abram's inheritance. We don't hear from Eliezer directly but can surmise he was put on the spot. Surely Eliezer would be a better choice than Lot; Lot would have squandered everything in Sodom and Gomorrah. Sarai, too, must have felt the same though never expressed it. If Eliezer were to take over after Abram died, she would become his wife and from that point on would be recognized as having been wed to a slave.

This dialogue between the Lord and Abram was taking place presumably within a tent because vs. 5 says "And he brought him outside." Note that the same verb *yatsa'* (to go forth) for "brought" is used in vs. 4 as "goes" (from your loins). In other words, first a *yatsa'* with respect to Abram's reproductive capacity and future generations followed by a *yatsa'* with respect to having him exit his tent and stand outside. In a moment the Lord will speak of Abram's descendants being more numerous than the stars which means that the vision of vs. 1 occurred at night, possibly while Abram was sleeping. So what happens after this second *yatsa'*? The Lord has Abram look at the sky. The sky is traditionally associated with God's dwelling place; such isn't the case here because the Lord came to Abram in a vision at night while sleeping. The verb for "look" is *navat* which implies having regard or respect for someone or something. "Consider and answer me, O Lord my God" [Ps 13.4]. Abram is asked not simply to look at the heavens (*shamym*) but toward them which gives that word the form *hashamaymah*. That is to say, Abram's *navat* is aimed in that direction, away from the conversation he has been having with the Lord since the opening of Chapter Fifteen. His *navat* is directed from that vision (*machazeh*) of vs. 1 to the physical viewing of the night sky.

Once Abram's attention is fixed *hashamaymah* and away from the *machazeh* or vision within the tent, the Lord tells him to "number the stars" if he can. The verb is *saphar* implying that Abram is to write...inscribe...the number of stars which would be on parchment or a wax tablet. That involves a form of calculation, for example, units into fifty or a hundred stars at a time until the tablet or parchment were filled. The verse at hand is followed by another instance of "then he said" which acts as a pause or buffer between this impossible task of writing down all the stars and equating that impossibly large number with future descendants. The text doesn't say whether or not Abram undertakes this task but skips over to "And he believed in the Lord." As for the future generations, they must be born from those who came with Abram from Haran, not from among the locals. So what did Eliezer of Damascus, the destined heir, think about all this? Despite being a trusted servant, he must have been disappointed greatly. In an instant Eliezer saw a glorious future slip away and would remain a regular member of Abram's household. Perhaps he rebelled and left, having persuaded some servants and slaves to come with him, even back to Damascus, as far away as possible from Abram. From there they could regroup and attack Abram at some future time.

As for Abram's profession, "he (the Lord) reckoned it to him as righteousness." That is to say, the Lord did the reckoning or *chashav* which fundamentally means to impute, reckon. "Against those who are quiet in the land they conceive words of deceit" [Ps 35.20]. This verb involves some amount of conniving and intimates that the Lord himself was acting a bit craftily for Abram's advantage by equating his just expressed faith in God with righteousness, *tsedaqah*. The situation at hand was tense and needs to be taken into consideration. Here was Abram in the midst of a hostile, Canaanite population with a barren wife, a disgruntled servant (Eliezer) and his experience with Lot which brought about an encounter with the king of Sodom. And so it's not surprising that the Lord attributed righteousness or justice to Abram for having believed in him, the same Lord who appeared to him within the tent during a dream. There was no other choice, really, except for Abram to pick up his belongings and return to Haran which would have been even more disgraceful in the eyes of his wife and retinue. It is from this encounter that Abram achieved a boldness he had lacked up until now, a boldness which enabled him later when he bargains over Sodom and Gomorrah. Such is his expression of *tsedaqah*.

Without missing a beat, the Lord continues speaking with Abram in vs. 7: "I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." The Lord felt it important to let Abram know who was in charge, and that he had admired his courage from the very beginning in Haran. For Abram to hear the Lord speak must have been painful; he had heard the Lord speak earlier followed by a trying situation. Would the same happen now? As far as inheriting the land of Canaan, in one way it's quite misplaced. Essentially Abram was in hostile territory...Canaan...and the locals weren't about to show favor to Abram, an outsider, as one intent upon usurping what rightly belonged to them. Such is the Canaanite point of view and perhaps even some within Abram's own people were fearful of the overwhelming number of local inhabitants who could crush them at a moment's notice. With that hostility established early on, it is no small wonder that for most of Israel's existence she would experience unceasing turmoil within her borders. The subject of inheritance is tricky to deal with because it's a fundamental principle governing ancient societies. Mess with it and you're in big trouble.

By the time vs. 8 comes around, there's a certain weariness with the dialogue because now Abram wants proof: "How am I to know that I shall possess it?" You'd think Abram would have been assured of the land from his initial dealing with the Lord back in Haran. While the Lord encountered him during key times of his sojourn, still that nagging question remained in Abram's mind. The Lord wishes to put an end to this tiresome dialogue and have Abram get on with it, so he proposes a sacrifice but a sacrifice minus an altar. "Bring me a heifer...a she-goat...a ram...a turtledove and a young pigeon." The first three (i.e., the larger animals) are each three years old meaning they are relatively young whereas no age is specified for the two birds. As for the young pigeon, it is a *gozal*; one other reference exists which is Dt 32.11: "Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young (*gozal*)." The verbal root means to chirp; though the sound of a pigeon and eaglet certainly are unlike, their young make pretty much the same noise. All the offerings the Lord had required of Abram

was readily accessible, so he brought them to the Lord without delay. The next step was to cut each of three animals (not the birds) in two and place each half “over against the other” [vs. 10]. *Batar* (this is the only use in the Bible) is the verb “to cut” which, as the context intimates, is a cutting with the intent to divide. A similar image is found in Jer 34.18: “And the men who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant which they made before me, I will make like the calf with they cut in two and passed between its parts.” As for the two birds—turtledove and pigeon—each was placed opposite each as undivided. The text doesn’t say whether these sacrifices were placed on the ground or upon an altar though the former seems more likely. The text thus far has been clear as to when Abram had erected an altar, so there’s no reason to omit mention of it again. The Lord wants Abram to place these animal pieces on the ground—upon that land *érets* of Canaan—which is destined to become his inheritance. Putting the halved victims on an altar would have been fine, but upon the presumed *érets* is a sure-fire guarantee for Abram so he doesn’t have to worry any more.

Another indication that this sacrifice differed from a conventional one is that we hear of no immolation; the carcasses just laid there without being consumed or the like. “And when birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away” [vs. 11]. Here is Abram—after he had split in two the heifer, she-goat and ram as well as having prepared the offerings of a turtledove and pigeon—hanging around to see what would happen. *Hayt* is the word for “bird of prey” suggesting vultures or the like. “A ravenous bird from the east” [Is 46.10]. The verse at hand implies that Abram arranged these animals as markers along a path with an unspecified intervening space between them, and that he did this during the evening or not long before sunset. It must have been a trying experience because Abram hadn’t a clue as to when the Lord would accept the offerings, let alone know how he would do so. Chances are that Abram felt awkward, even a bit foolish, as he set the carcasses in order well out of sight of his family and retinue. If Abram knew that a fire would come down and consume the carcasses, well and good; he’d have an impressed audience. However, Abram hadn’t a clue, so he arranged the offerings out sight to avoid embarrassment.

The next verse (12) speaks of sunset intimating the relatively late time of this preparation: “As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram.” The birds of prey disappeared shortly after sunset leaving open the possibility of nighttime carnivorous animals which would be far more dangerous. The verse at hand has two types of darkness coming on: the natural one of sunset and the mysterious one which fell upon Abram. The noun for “deep sleep” is *tardemah* noted in 2.21: “So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man,” that is, when he took a rib to create the first woman. Also as noted in conjunction with that verse, the noun is derived from the verbal root *radam*, to sleep heavily with the connotation of snoring. With that first incident in mind, one can’t help but wonder if the Lord were about to perform a similar operation upon Abram; not that he was going to create a woman but a new kind of being. Regardless, Abram was knocked out cold and lay helpless on the ground without being able to protect the carcasses. No problem, because the Lord was close by. He even thought Abram might not be up to the task, hence the *tardemah*.



As far as this *tardemah* is concerned, we know when the Lord brought it upon Abram but have no word as to when Abram woke up, for he was knocked out fully for the remainder of Chapter Fifteen.

In addition to this *tardemah*, vs. 12 says a “dread and great darkness fell upon him.” The first word in Hebrew is a noun, *‘eymah* or horror. “My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me” [Ps 55.4]. In addition to this *‘eymah* we have *chashekah* (*choshek* is similar and more common, from the same verbal root). Thus Abram was subjected to three forms of darkness: the natural one, deep sleep and the last one which is akin to the lack of sunlight but can have moral or distressing overtones. The Lord wanted to make sure Abram was unconscious almost to the point of death before he was to communicate with him. And that communication is very familiar by now: “Know of a surety that your descendants will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs” [vs. 13]. “Of a surety” in Hebrew is given by a repetition of the verb *yadah*, to know...something like “know know.” Repetition of the words is meant to for them to sink in as important. Good thing that Abram was stone-cold because what God was communicating wasn’t what he had been expecting, especially after all his complaining (and justifiable at that) about having traveled so far and still not having an heir. Despite the *tardemah* of Abram, he retained the ability to receive communication from God and to remember it upon waking. We have nothing as to his response upon awakening.

Communication within the context of *tardemah* doesn’t concerns not Abram directly (who, despite all he went through to date, came off quite well) but his descendants, *zarah* (i.e., seed). They were to be *ger* or strangers in a land or *‘erets* not their own, a terrible fate for a settled people to whom identification of place is so important. However, Abram’s descendants...sprung from the current generation that came from Haran-into-Canaan-into-Egypt-into-Canaan...didn’t quite fit into this category. The reason? They grew accustomed to the continuous movement of nomadic existence, a fact heightened by living amid potentially hostile Canaanites who at any moment could wipe them out immediately. The sticking point here was that the Lord did not reveal to Abram the country in which his descendants would be *ger*, strangers. “A land not theirs” rules out Canaan and “will be slaves” suggests some other place. Those who came from Haran with Abram hadn’t yet experienced slavery, so the place where that will take occur remains concealed from Abram. Furthermore, we haven’t any out-loud reflection by Abram as to where it might be. The most depressing part of this *tardemah*? “They will be slaves there (in the land not their own), and they will be oppressed for four hundred years.” That’s a very long time, a sentence Abram would have difficulty accepting if he were conscious. Immediately he’d cease complaining about his wife Sarai’s infertility and take it from there. Better to have Eliezar of Damascus (cf. vs. 2) be the inheritor than to be faced with such a long time.

Even the words which continue into vs. 14 aren’t consoling to Abram: “but I will bring judgment on the nation which they serve.” That’s a projection well into the future, so far removed from Abram’s generation that it doesn’t affect him...or does it? Such a question

remains to be worked out through the rest of Abram's life and gets some resolution in 17.2, "And I will make my covenant between me and you and will multiply you exceedingly." Not knowing the nation about which the Lord is talking must have vexed Abram when he awoke from his *tardemah*. The only other option apart from Canaan based upon personal experience was Egypt to which he was forced to migrate due to a famine. Being there or anywhere other than a land supposedly theirs was bad enough, but reduced to be slaves? "And afterward they shall come out with great possessions." Abram's first thought at these supposedly consoling words must have been less than desirable, best unrecorded. *Rekush* is the word for "possessions" which was noted earlier and can involve acquired persons and/or slaves. The Lord says simply that a generation some four hundred years hence will come out of an unknown land and enter an equally unknown land. If Abram was in the three-fold state of *tardemah* (deep sleep), *'eymah* (horror) and *chashekah* (darkness), what the Lord had just communicated was enough to wake the dead.

"As for yourself." Such begins vs. 15 (in Hebrew, 'and you'), almost treating Abram as an after-thought once the Lord had painted a dreary picture of his descendants several centuries in future. The Lord wanted Abram not to disregard that distant event because how he responds now will have direct implications on those generations. In the verse at hand, the Lord tells Abram that he "shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age." Abram's fathers or predecessors are not from Canaan but from Haran, a reminder of his status of sojourner. Despite all the travails, Abram will die in peace...*shalom*...yet has a number of years ahead of him in Canaan and hopefully not a return to Egypt. Already he got a glimpse of life there, of how the Egyptians capitalized on the famine and raising prices on grain, etc. Abram must have communicated this to people in Canaan and so a tradition began viewing Egypt in a less than desirable light. Later generations, especially those who became slaves to the Egyptians, retained memory of this which must have made them have second thoughts about being there, all this a kind of prelude to the Exodus.

Right after the Lord communicates to Abram his fate, he returns to the matter at hand, the "fourth generation" which will "come back here" but leaves unspecified where those future generations will dwell. One important condition for their return to "here" which seems to imply Canaan: that "the iniquity of the Amorites (might be) complete." This iniquity or *hawon*, a term often with sexual connotations, can be traced all the way back to the person of Canaan (the father of the Amorites, vs. 16) cursed by Noah right after the flood. Actually, it's another name for Noah's youngest son, Ham, who had covered the nakedness of his father: "Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers" [9.25]. Despite the unfairness of such a curse, it stuck from that time right after the flood down to Abram's day. The word for Noah's curse is *'arar* first used by God in 3.14 toward the serpent who deceived the woman and certainly was on his mind when dealing with Canaan. Over time that *'arar* became a *hawon* or a curse resulting from sexual deviancy. From the Lord's point of view, the *hawon* belonging to the descendants of Ham/Canaan is not quite full. *Shalom* is the word for "complete" which differs considerably from the *shalom* the Lord promised Abram

upon his death. And so a time period of four hundred years was required for this *shalom* after which Abram's descendants will be liberated.

Vs. 17 interrupts the divine communication with Abram who during all this was under the three-fold unconsciousness of *tardemah*, *'eymah* and *chashekah* or deep sleep, dread and darkness (cf. vs. 12). Attention shifts to the three animals and two birds which had been divided and were laying (presumably) on the ground as opposed to upon an altar. "Behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces." This took place well after dark ('when the sun had gone down') and when the birds of prey had left yet before any threat of carnivorous animals. *Halatah* is the word for "dark" and has two other references, both in Ezekiel, in reference to the prophet going into exile: "In their sight you shall lift the baggage upon your shoulder and carry it out in the dark" [12.6]. Use of *halatah* fits in well here with all the talk about the fourth generation going into slavery and later being freed. After all, the Hebrews left Egypt under the cover of darkness. As for vs. 17, presumably Abram was still knocked out and was unaware of what was transpiring. Where he was relative to all this isn't recorded; he wasn't in the between the pieces but more likely off to the side safely out of the way of the pot and torch which weren't borne by anyone but moved on their own accord. *Tanur* is the word for "fire pot" which is more like an oven, by no means small, which is used for cooking. "They shall burn as an oven" [Mal 4.1]. *Lapyd* is a torch or lamp—much smaller—and carried in one's hand. "And held lamps in their left hands" [Jdg 7.20]. It was easy to visualize some being in the darkness carrying a *lapyd*, but a *tanur*? That had to be self-propelled like the chariot of Ezekiel's vision which was marked by images of fire. Despite this presence of fire, nothing is said whether the *tanur* or *lapyd* were used to consume the offerings which Abram had presented. The main idea is that both passed in between these pieces or *gezer*, the only other reference being Ps 136.13: "To him who divided the Red Sea in sunder, for his steadfast love endures forever." Thus the *gezer* of Abram's offerings foretell the passing of the Israelites with "the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left" [Ex 14.22].

"On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram" [vs. 18]. At last. The very words which Abram in his three-fold sleep wanted to hear ever since he left his home in Haran. "Day" [*yom*] doesn't apply to daylight hours but refers to when "the sun was going down" [vs. 12] and is akin to a *kairos* event, a unique occasion. The last time a *beryth* had been made was many generations ago right after the worldwide flood when Noah exited the ark, the sign of a bow in the sky, 9.17. The verb *karath* for "cut" suggests either chiseling into stone or inscribing on a tablet but here it assumes special significance because the offerings placed upon the ground were cut as well. As noted in vs. 10, the verb for "cut" is *batar*, cutting with the intent to divide. Yet again the Lord communicates the *beryth* to Abram in familiar terms: "To your descendants I give this land (*'erets*)." As the Lord made clear earlier, Abram has no part in the *'erets* in which he finds himself; that's reserved for his descendants. He spells this out by saying the *'erets*—and that means more than physical property but the place which defines an individual and a group—as extending from "the river of Egypt to the river Euphrates." Indeed, a fairly substantial piece of land which includes ten different tribes

enumerated in vss. 20-21. With the western boundary defined by the “river of Egypt” or the Nile, that means Abram’s descendants will be right on the border with a sophisticated though alien civilization. It also serves as clue to Abram as to the country in which his descendants will be slaves (cf. vs. 13). As for the ten tribes, they will be subjugated over time, and their collective might is no match for that of mighty Egypt.

And so Chapter Fifteen concludes with a promise of what Abram desired ardently. There is no actual resolution as to the animal and bird carcasses which he had cut, what the smoking fire pot and flaming torch did to them nor what happened next. The same applies to Abram’s three-fold sleep. Presumably that lasted the entire night or from shortly after sunset until dawn. Similarly we hear nothing of Abram’s response upon awakening nor any doubt as to what he had experienced. The text has a larger picture in mind, extension of Abram’s descendants with the birth of Ishmael. As things turned out later, Ishmael developed into a tribe not entirely unlike the native inhabitants of Canaan, that is, essentially at enmity with the descendants of Abram.

## 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 is 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 finds 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 *beheydayk* ('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 you 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 *raham*) 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 *érets* 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 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 lose, so why not? Abraham had the advantage of dealing with the Lord since his arrival in Canaan, including his diversion into Egypt. Thus he was familiar with how often the Lord puts people off in order to test them, almost to the point of taunting them. "Will you indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked?" Before Abraham posed this question he side-stepped the niceties of obeisance and came right out with showing his confidence and familiarity with the Lord. *Saphah* is the verb which suggests a scraping together as well as putting into a heap. "He shall descend into battle and perish" [1Sam 26.10]. By the way, the Bible has approximately forty-seven different verbs for "to destroy." As intimated earlier, Abraham got this information about Sodom and Gomorrah through contacts with Lot; thus he did not succumb to the common temptation to blot out the cities, knowing that there had to be at least one righteous (*tsadyq*) person within them (tragically, that turned out different).

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

rule of their king as intimated in 14.17-24 when he came in contact with the man himself. Note the position of these supposed *tsadyqim*: first as “within the city” and followed by those “who are in it” [vs. 24]. The first position is *betok* and the second, *qerev*. The former refers to in the middle (not necessarily the geographic center) of something or of persons whereas the latter to in the midst as in the sense of at the heart of something or someone. Thus the fifty *tsadyqim* are in the middle and heart of Sodom (again, Gomorrah not mentioned). Should they be missing, the city has no reason to exist. As for their presence—and this applies to Abraham starting out with fifty *tsadyqim* and ending with ten—the number is less important than the two-fold position. All shouldn’t be thought of as gathered together under one roof but scattered throughout the city unbeknownst to each other. In vs. 24 Sodom is described as a “place” or *maqom* which as noted earlier, is an inhabited area and can extend beyond the city proper to what we’d call today suburbs. As Abraham starts his bargaining process, this larger expanse of territory seems smaller than first glance, i.e., Sodom and satellite areas, and thus a larger population mass.

“Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked. Far be that from you! Shall not the judge of the earth do right” [vs. 25]? Abraham is putting words into the Lord’s mouth, even to the point of a rebuke. *Chalylah* is the interrogative used here (‘far be it from you’) and *davar* is the noun for “thing,” a word whose verbal root is to speak. Thus that which is done and exists out there had been spoken, and that implies a source...a speaker...if you will. In this sentence Abraham is reminding the Lord that he is judge of all the earth, presupposing that he will have mercy or better, “do right” or *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 *nepshesh* 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 *rahah* (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 her. 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 *qytor*, smoke. Surely Moses had in mind the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah when he recorded his encounter with the Lord on Mount Sinai. No wonder his experience was so terrifying to the Israelites who looked on from the camp below. Like Abraham, Moses had "stood before the Lord" [18.22] and interceded for the Israelites. He too must have been fearful that when he came down from the mountain, only one Israelite would be left and the rest overturned as the two cities. Such a tragedy would be the ultimate triumph for Pharaoh who had persecuted the Israelites.

"God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow" [vs. 29]. This part of the verse is prefaced by the words "when God destroyed the cities," the verb *shachat* being used as in vs. 13 by the visitors. While Lot had been the center of attention with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, mention of Abraham returns 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.