# Genesis Part Two: Terah’s Lines of Descent, through Abraham (11:27—25:11)

“Thus far, the creation project has turned out quite against the dreams of the creator,” but “the one who calls the worlds into being now makes a second call.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Once again he reboots the project. With 11:27 “an epochal juncture in the history of humankind has been reached.”[[2]](#footnote-2) But “God is no longer engaging in damage control, as he was in the first eleven chapters of the Torah.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

In this connection, Part Two of Genesis focuses on Yahweh’s dealings with Abraham and Sarah. The story of creation and of things unraveling was a “primordial” and “universal” story, and one would have expected the story of God’s putting things right to have the same characteristics. But not for the last time, God changes his way of effecting his purpose. “God’s plan is universal *in scope*” but now “not in method or means.”[[4]](#footnote-4) It’s now effected through particular people in a particular place. The transition from 1:1—11:26 to what follows marks a transition from God’s act of creation to God’s entering into a covenant relationship with a particular people; the linking of these two stories in one scroll marks the “indissoluble” nature of the connection between the two.[[5]](#footnote-5) No creation without covenant; no covenant without creation.

Gen 11:27—50:26 then divides into a three-part drama, the story of three generations of a family, Abraham and Sarah (11:27—25:11), Isaac and Rebekah (25:12—35:29), and Jacob and his sons (36:1—50:26). A heading announcing “lines of descent” that are to follow introduces each part. Within 11:27—25:11, the opening unit tells of the background and of how things begin. What follows then comprises a series of stories concerning how Yahweh’s purpose is repeatedly imperiled but is safeguarded and partially fulfilled. Gen 11:27—25:11 relates the story of a God who makes outrageous demands, issues extraordinary promises, and intervenes to see that his purpose gets fulfilled. People such as Abraham and Sarah are sometimes people who trust God and sometimes people whose trust fails: there are two stories about passing off your wife as your sister (with another to follow in Gen 26) and three stories about quarrels over land (with another to follow in Gen 26). Gen 11:27—12:8 and 12:9—13:4 form an opening pair of units that lay out two sides to Yahweh (he commands and promises) and two sides to Abraham (he obeys and trusts, and his faith and commitment waver) which the subsequent stories then further illustrate. The first five units lead into one another:

11:27—12:8 Terah moves, Yahweh issues a summons and promises, Abraham obeys

12:9—13:4 Yahweh’s promises aren’t working out, Abraham panics

13:5-18 Yahweh’s promises aren’t working out, Abraham makes a sacrifice to Lot

14:1-24 The sacrifice has repercussions which require another commitment

15:1-21 Yahweh gives a reassurance about offspring and a pact relating to the land.

That last unit marks a transition to the middle units[[6]](#footnote-6) which center on the promise of offspring:

16:1-16 A false start, with conflict and resolution

17:1-27 A pact relating to the promise, with a sign

18:1—19:38 A reiteration of the promise, with a contrasting story about Abraham’s nephew

20:1-18 Another endangering of the potential mother of the offspring

21:1-34 The birth of a son to Sarah, with conflicts and resolutions

22:1-19 The testing of Abraham regarding Isaac

The third section takes the story to is close

22:20—23:20 A family report, Sarah’s death, and the acquiring of a family burial place

24:1-67 The acquisition of a wife for Isaac

25:1-11 Abraham’s preparation for dying and his death

Compared with the succeeding two parts of the drama, 11:27—25:11 comprises a series of stories that are in themselves relatively self-contained, though part of their significance emerges from their place in the sequence to which they belong.

# Genesis 11:27—12:8—The Background, the Summons, and the Promises

## Overview

The initial question which 11:27—12:8 answers is, “How did Abraham and Sarah come to be in Canaan?” The story offers three sorts of answer.

* It happened because Terah decided to move his family from Ur
* It happened because Yahweh bade Abraham go to Canaan
* It happened because Abraham did as Yahweh said.

With his bidding to Abraham Yahweh associates a series of promises:

* He will live in the country to which Yahweh directs him
* He will be blessed and thus fruitful and will thus become a big nation
* He will experience Yahweh’s protection
* He will become a standard and means whereby other nations will seek blessing.

But there are obstacles and complications on the way.

* Sarah can’t have children
* Terah gets diverted from continuing to Canaan and eventually dies in Harran
* Abraham’s brother dies and Abraham has to take his nephew Lot with him
* The Canaanites are in occupation of the country.

We have not seen the last of some of these obstacles and complications.

## Translation

11:27So[[7]](#footnote-7) these are Teraḥ’s lines of descent.

Teraḥ fathered Abram,[[8]](#footnote-8) Naḥor, and Haran, and Haran fathered Lot. 28Haran died in the presence of[[9]](#footnote-9) Teraḥ his father in the country that was his homeland, Ur[[10]](#footnote-10) of the Kaśdites.[[11]](#footnote-11) 29Abram and Naḥor got themselves wives; the name of Abram’s wife was Śaray and the name of Naḥor’s wife was Milkah bat Haran, the father of Milkah and of Yiskah. 30But Śaray was infertile;[[12]](#footnote-12) she had no child.[[13]](#footnote-13)

31Teraḥ got Abram his son, Lot ben Haran his grandson, and Śaray his daughter-in-law, Abram’s wife,[[14]](#footnote-14) and they left Ur of the Kaśdites together[[15]](#footnote-15) to go to the country of Kena‘an, but they came as far as Ḥarran[[16]](#footnote-16) and lived there. 32Teraḥ’s time came to 205[[17]](#footnote-17) years, and Teraḥ died in Ḥarran.

12:1But Yahweh said[[18]](#footnote-18) to Abram:

Take yourself[[19]](#footnote-19) from your country,

from your homeland, and from your father’s household,

To the country that I will enable you to see,

2so I may[[20]](#footnote-20) make you into a big nation.

I will bless you and I intend to make your name big[[21]](#footnote-21)

and you are to become[[22]](#footnote-22) a blessing.

3I intend to bless the people who bless you,

but the person who diminishes you[[23]](#footnote-23) I will curse.[[24]](#footnote-24)

All the kin-groups on the earth

will gain blessing[[25]](#footnote-25) by you.

4Abram went as Yahweh spoke to him, and Lot went with him. Abram was a man of seventy-five years when he left Ḥarran.

5So Abram got Śaray his wife, Lot his brother’s son, all the property that they had acquired, and all the people that they had produced[[26]](#footnote-26) in Ḥarran, and left to go to the country of Kena‘an. They came to the country of Kena‘an, 6and Abram passed through the country[[27]](#footnote-27) as far as the site at Šekem, as far as Teacher’s Oak.[[28]](#footnote-28) Now the Kena‘anites were then in the country. 7But Yahweh appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this country,” and he built an altar there for Yahweh who had appeared to him. 8He went on from there to the mountain country on the east of Bet-el, and spread his tent, Bet-el on the west, Ha’ay on the east. He built an altar there for Yahweh and called out with the name Yahweh.

## Interpretation

MT’s unit runs from 11:10 to 12:9, while the new synagogue lection begins at 12:1 and continues to 17:27. One can see why the devisers of the synagogue lectionary and of the medieval chapter divisions were attracted to the resonant declaration in 12:1. But in the introduction to this commentary we have noted how a heading such as “these are Terah’s lines of descent” (11:27) looks like the introduction to one of the major parts of Genesis as a whole. In this case, the opening scenes in Part Two concern Yahweh’s dealings with Terah’s son Abraham and his wife Sarah; and a narrative arc does come to completion with 12:8 as Abraham has arrived in Canaan, built altars there, named Yahweh’s name there, and spread his tent there in a way that implies more than an overnight stay as if they are on the way somewhere else. “Within the book of Genesis, no section is more significant than 11:27—12:9”[[29]](#footnote-29) (I would say 11:27—12:8). It is quite a statement.[[30]](#footnote-30)

While the account of Terah’s lines of descent continues from 11:26, it thus opens with a new heading and then reprises information from v. 26b before seguing in vv. 27b-30 into more information on the family. Such material might appear in an account of someone’s lines of descent, especially a segmented genealogy such as 10:1-32, but it provides much more detail than appeared in the linear genealogy in 11:10-26, detail significant as background to what will follow. Immediately, it leads into an account of Terah’s moving his family from Ur, in v. 31. Only with v. 32 do we get the genealogical information that would bring Terah’s details to a close, but not in the same form as vv. 10-26: it gives the total number of his years instead of the number of years he lived after the birth of his sons, then the account closes with a note about his dying. It thus resembles the pattern in Gen 5, but its point here is that Terah died in Harran and did not accompany Abraham to Canaan.

The switch in the synagogue lection at 12:1 reflects the transition from the lines of descent and story in 11:27-32 whose framework comes from P, to the story beginning in 12:1 whose framework comes from J. Combining passages from the two earlier versions generates some uncertainty about the order and interrelationship of events. Gen 12 begins with a *waw*-consecutive, which one way or another links it closely with 11:27-32, though how to understand the *waw*-consecutive (specifically, whether it denotes an event consecutive on events in the previous verses) is a different matter. The importance of Yahweh’s words once again receives emphasis through their being expressed in lines that can be scanned as poetic bicola and that manifest some parallelism. They begin with a command, but they quickly segue into a series of promises. And they begin with an act of separation from the rest of the world and a promise for Abraham that sets him over against the world, but they segue into a promise indicating that Abraham’s blessing has significance for other peoples. The move repeats itself in heightened fashion as Yahweh speaks of blessing and tough-minded protection, but also of all the world’s kin-groups seeking the kind of blessing Abraham will enjoy.

The unit as a whole takes up themes and motifs from Genesis Part One, from its beginning with creation through the Noah story to its end: lines of descent, blessing and curse, land and increase, fathering and getting wives, altars and calling in Yahweh’s name, gaining a name.[[31]](#footnote-31) It is the same God with the same purpose who is at work here. In addition, the unit introduces people and places that will be significant as the chapters unfold—Abraham and the childless Sarah, Nahor and Milkah back in the homeland near Harran, Lot for whom Abraham has responsibility, the promise about becoming a big nation and having a big name and becoming a blessing, Yahweh’s protection from anyone who tries to cut them down, the promise to give Abraham’s offspring the country notwithstanding the Canaanites’ presence there, the places Shechem and Beth El. In other words, though we can analyze the section in terms of the way it answers the question “How did Abraham and Sarah come to be in Canaan?” in some respects the questions the unit answers are not within the section itself but beyond it. The unit is indeed an introduction to Part Two of Genesis as a whole. The unit also illustrates how different parties take initiatives from time to time in this story. To oversimplify slightly:

11:27-32 Terah takes an initiative

12:1-8 Yahweh takes an initiative

12:9—14:24 Abraham takes initiatives

15:1-21 Yahweh takes an initiative

16:1-16 Sarah takes an initiative

17:1—19:38 Yahweh takes initiatives

20:1-18 Abraham takes an initiative

21:1—22:19 Yahweh takes initiatives

22:24—25:11 Abraham takes initiatives

**11:27-30**. After the initial reprise in v. 27 of material from the encouraging genealogy in vv. 10-26 with its lack of reference to anyone dying, the account of Terah’s lines of descent gives way to something more mixed: one of Terah’s sons dies (v. 28). Parents are not supposed to have to bury their children, but in a traditional society they often have to, and while the family are in Ur, Teraḥ has had this experience. It might be tempting to attribute Haran’s death to his serving other gods,[[32]](#footnote-32) but he was hardly the only one (see Josh 24:2), so more likely Genesis takes his death as just one of those things. The geographical context is “Ur of the Kasdites” (Chaldeans), presumably the Ur in Lower Mesopotamia, near the Persian Gulf, one of the great cities in Babylonia; some of these cities were listed in 10:10. But there was also more than one city called something like Ur in Upper Mesopotamia, nearer Harran, and such a reference might make more sense.[[33]](#footnote-33) While the Chaldeans were not in Mesopotamia until some centuries after Abraham’s day, and were not the rulers of Ur until about the time Babylon became the great imperial power (hence the references in 2 Kings 24—25), they would have been there in the time of people listening to the story in that later time, and the term identifies the city for them.

Before they left Ur, Teraḥ’s surviving sons got married (v. 29). Sarah’s parents are not identified; the later effect will be to bring a surprise when Abraham calls Sarah his sister (12:13; 20:12)—if it is true. Nor does Genesis give us any more information about Iskah. Nor are we told of the interesting meaning of Sarah’s name (“queen/princess”),[[34]](#footnote-34) which forms an interesting pair with Milkah (“queen”). Nor therefore does Genesis note that “Sarah” looks like the name of the wife of the moon god Sin while “Milkah” looks like a title of Ishtar, the queen of heaven, daughter of Sin; the moon god was a significant figure in the religion of Ur and of Harran.[[35]](#footnote-35) Whereas we will hear nothing more of Iskah, we will hear more of Milkah in Gen 24. The “main characteristics” attributed to Sarah are: “no family, married, barren, beautiful, and old.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

The further family sadness is that Abraham’s wife cannot have children (v. 30); the double statement of the point underscores it. It is not just sadness for Abraham and Sarah. It is a worry for Terah: one son dead, another who will not have children: does this family have a viable future? The lack of a heading referring to Abraham’s “lines of descent” adds to the suspense in this connection. The Hebrew word for “child” comes from the same root (*yālad*)as the words for lines of descent, for fathered, and for homeland in vv. 27-28. Sarah cannot play her part in what is signified by those words. As well as being key to the future of this family, her playing this part is key (we are about to discover) to the fulfillment of God’s purpose.[[37]](#footnote-37) Sarah’s inability to have children is therefore an important aspect of the background to the story of Abraham and Sarah which will follow. Part One of Genesis has referred to no one’s infertility; having children has not seemed to be a problem. In Parts Two and Three it becomes a problem. Yahweh chooses to work through someone who has no potential for achieving the thing he wishes to achieve. The Babylonian conquest of Judah put Zion into the same position, and Yahweh reformulated his promise to it in that context (Isa 54). The situation when the people of God has no capacity to generate a future is the situation to which God’s promise speaks.

**11:31-32.** So it wasTerah who set the family going on a move to Canaan. The connection of Ur with the Chaldeans hints at more than a geographical point about Ur, a religious point and/or a political one. Is Terah implicitly taking leave of Babylonian religion and taking leave of the empire? In the former connection moving to Canaan would hardly be an improvement; and the account of Abraham’s family which will follow (with their cattle and sheep and tents) suggests that Terah’s family were not themselves urban people—they would not have lived in Ur itself. So Terah’s making his move is difficult to interpret. Were the sadness about Haran[[38]](#footnote-38) and the worry about Abraham part of the background? There is no hint that they migrate because God told them to do so, and in general the opening chapters of Genesis have been unfolding because people did the natural thing. Why was Canaan their intended destination? And why then did they go to Harran, 500-600 miles northwest of Ur, just north of the border between Iraq and Turkey? There was no need to go that far north to get to Canaan.[[39]](#footnote-39) Is the implication that only the narrator knows that they were on their way to Canaan? Perhaps they were like Bedouin who were simply on the move because that was their lifestyle. Anyway, people listening to the story would know something of what is presupposed by the laconic account of their journey, though later hints in Genesis implicitly expand on the summary (e.g., 12:5; 13:5-18). They would have taken everything they had and everything they needed for their travels—flocks and other livestock, tents, grain supplies, skins of olive oil, tools, looms, ovens, gold and silver for bartering…. They would perhaps travel at about ten miles per day (wagon trains across the United States in the nineteenth century travelled at ten to twenty miles per day), stopping early each evening to set up camp and cook. If they went direct from Ur to Harran, the journey would take two months.

With what sense of sadness and failure does Terah eventually die in Harran (v. 32)? The opening paragraphs of the story of Abraham and Sarah do not look like the beginning of anything. It is not a story of how human wilfulness spoils things, but of how circumstances spoil things.

**12:1-3**. The *waw*-consecutive would naturally suggest that Yahweh’s bidding to Abraham follows on the death of Terah. But if Terah was 70 when Abraham was born and lived until he was 205 (11:26, 32) and Abraham is 75 now (v. 4), Terah is nowhere dead yet. In one sense, the fact that 11:31-32 came from P and 12:1-9 from J could explain the disjunction, though it does not explain how the two passages interrelate in Genesis itself. Here, it seems that 12:1 is back-tracking.[[40]](#footnote-40) Gen 11:27—12:8 then incorporates one of those occasions when Genesis abandons chronological order to tie off one section of the story before focusing on where the story has taken a new turn in the meanwhile. Terah and his decision-making is the past. He’s dead even though he is still alive.[[41]](#footnote-41) What Yahweh has now said to Abraham is the future. Abraham now has to be the decision-maker. Thus “human agency plays a real role” in the restoring of humanity, yet human initiative plays less; Abraham’s action is “responsive, not originative.”[[42]](#footnote-42) And in order to fulfill God’s commission, Abraham doesn’t have to do anything except go, and let God fulfill his promises (he is not responsible for furthering God’s kingdom or bringing it in or extending it or working for it). Meanwhile, the rest of the family remains esconsed in Harran, as their subsequent location in this area will presuppose. Whereas Ur had once been their “homeland” (11:28), Harran now is (24:4, 7), and it is in Harran that Yahweh speaks to Abraham and sets him on the move. We can then only guess at the relationship between Terah’s decision to take his family to Canaan and Yahweh’s bidding Abraham to go there (but see 15:7). And although we know about Abraham from 11:27-31, we don’t know anything of his character or of any reason why Yahweh should have settled on him.[[43]](#footnote-43) God’s “choosing” or “election” of Abraham (though Genesis does not use this word) does not imply (e.g.) ethnic superiority, as Deut 9:4-6 will make explicit. And paradoxically, his apparently being the eldest son might seem to disqualify him, whereas the “conspiracy of nature and circumstance” seems to favor Lot (Nahor has been left behind in Ur, Sarai is infertile, and Lot’s father is dead).[[44]](#footnote-44)

But Yahweh tells Abraham what he is now to do. It’s conventional to refer to the “call” of Abraham; the expression comes in Isa 51:2 and Heb 11:8, though not here. If it is a call it is a peremptory one, like Paul’s call to be an apostle (Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1), which involved blinding him and throwing him off his horse. God’s call is more a summons. It means God telling someone what to do, like a master his servant. It’s not an invitation. It may involve hating father and the rest of one’s family (Luke 14:26).[[45]](#footnote-45) This “Yahweh said” resembles the one that tells Cain to master wrongdoing or tells Noah to get into his container ship. It’s irrational and demanding like Yahweh’s original command to Adam and Eve. Yahweh is not suggesting that Abraham might like to think about a possible relocation or a possible vocation. He’s giving an order. And it’s devastating in its negativity. Yahweh piles up the sacrifice he is demanding: your country; not only your country but your homeland; not only your homeland but your family.[[46]](#footnote-46) The words’ overlapping reference adds to their impact. They recall the comment that a man abandons his father and mother (2:24). Yahweh’s commission is thus demanding. Home is safe and protected. Leaving home means abandoning that security.[[47]](#footnote-47) But precisely because Abraham’s name is to be turned into a name of blessing for all earth’s kin-groups, he has to leave his own country, his homeland, and his father’s household.[[48]](#footnote-48)

The only information he gets about where he is going (vv. 1b-2) is that it’s a country that Yahweh will enable him to see in due course. Oh, thanks! It’s another hint that while the narrator knows that the family is on their way to Canaan (11:31), no one else did, when they left Ur or when they left Harran. Abraham leaves not knowing where he is going (Heb 11:8). People listening to the story who collude with the narrator, too, live in suspense for a verse or three about where the journey will take him.[[49]](#footnote-49)

God gives Abraham no inducements in terms of a land flowing with milk and honey.[[50]](#footnote-50) But Abraham goes with promises from Yahweh. The first is that he will become a big nation. It’s surprising that God thus uses the word *gôy* rather than the word *‘am*, “people.” It was the latter word that came in 11:6; one might have expected the terms to come the other way around.[[51]](#footnote-51) Genesis implies some ambivalence about what might be called the polity of a people.[[52]](#footnote-52) Abraham’s offspring is not a nation, but it is to become one. The other nations are kin-groups, like Abraham. The promise about becoming a people or a nation is implausible, especially for a man whose wife cannot have children. Whether it would be implausible for people listening to the story would depend on when they lived. In Moses’s day Abraham’s descendants have become a nation, a substantial people that one can think of as a political entity (e.g., Exod 1:7; 19:6). In David or Solomon’s day, or in Omri’s day, this record of Yahweh’s words would invite people to rejoice in what Yahweh has done in fulfilling his promise. Through Judah’s history and into the exile (see Isa 51:2) and during the Second Temple period it would raise the question whether it was a promise Yahweh was really going to fulfill for them. The same question would arise regarding the idea of having a big name.

Yahweh underscores the implausibility of his promise when he goes on to make explicit that he will bless Abraham, because “blessing” itself means numerical fruitfulness. To judge from the repetitions, blessing is the key word in the promise in vv. 2-3.”Yahweh showers Abraham with blessings.”[[53]](#footnote-53) This promise takes up God’s action in 1:28 and 9:1. The extent of the fulfilment of the promise (Yahweh implies) will mean other people being astonished. The tower-builders in Gen 11 had wanted to make a name for themselves but had only succeeded in a way they didn’t intend. Yahweh himself will do it for the person who is not seeking it. It will thus mean he becomes a blessing, which means being the kind of person whose name gets used in prayers for blessing: “May God bless you as he blessed x” (cf. Prov 10:7; Zech 8:13). Abraham will become the gold standard of blessings. “His blessings and his fame will be so great that they will spill over to benefit those around him.”[[54]](#footnote-54)

Yahweh goes on (v. 3) to restate the point, further tweaking the significance of the word blessing. There is a kind of blessing that only God can do—the kind that God promised in the first reference to blessing in v. 2. There is also a derived or derivative version of that blessing which some people can do, which is the opposite of the cursing that Noah did in 9:25, the kind of blessing that Melkizedeq or Aaron or Balaam will do (Gen 14:19; Num 6:23; 22—23). Such people declare that someone will be blessed by God, and it happens. There will be people who for one reason or another bless Abraham in this sense; and Yahweh will bless them. On the other hand, there will be an occasional individual who diminishes Abraham, who declares that he is going to become nothing (it’s the word Yahweh used in 8:21). Yahweh will protect Abraham from the diminishing that this person desires. One might expect Yahweh to say that he will diminish that person, but he actually says he will curse that person (as Noah did). “Yahweh does not command Abraham to go out in order to bring about curse, although that may happen in the process.”[[55]](#footnote-55) The point about the curse is to effect that protection. A blunter version of the promise will come on the lips of a foreigner at the other end of the story in the Torah, when the Israelites are about to arrive in Canaan (Num 24:9). But here, Yahweh further restates the promise about Abraham becoming a blessing, and restates it in ultra-high definition rainbow colors. All the kin-groups of the earth will gain blessing by Abraham. They will not merely pray for blessing like Abraham’s; they will receive it because of him. Genesis is not specific about how it will happen, though it will occasionally tell stories that one might see as examples—the story of Joseph in Egypt is the fullest one. Paul will see the promise fulfilled in even more rainbow colors (Gal 3:8). What is clear here is that God’s “choosing” or “election” of Abraham is not designed ultimately to exclude other peoples but ultimately to include them. Belonging to the non-elect does not imply belonging to the anti-elect.[[56]](#footnote-56)

“It is no small honour to be ‘Abraham’s seed.’”[[57]](#footnote-57) Fortunately for Gentiles, you don’t have to be physically descended from Abraham in order to be his son or daughter; one “natural” son of Abraham affirms that you can be adopted into his family, on the basis of trusting in God as Abraham did (Rom 4:16; Gal 3:7-9). After Jesus’s execution and resurrection God promises that the Jewish people would now see all the nations finding blessing through them and along with them, as he had said to Abraham (Acts 3:25-26).[[58]](#footnote-58) And it happens. People who trust in Jesus and thus belong to him do count as the offspring of Abraham and are among the heirs of his promise, whatever their race or social position or gender. It is in the giving of the Spirit that the blessing of Abraham that was destined for all nations comes to them (Gal 3:8, 14, 28-29). Unfortunately, they then have to take seriously John the Baptizer’s warning not to think that they are okay because they are Abraham’s children (Matt 3:9).

**12:4**. Yahweh says “go”; Abraham goes. “Whom… would these words not have disturbed? He reveals to him neither the place nor the country.” But instead of asking, Abraham just goes.[[59]](#footnote-59) The two occurrences of the verb “go” bookend vv. 1-4. The motif of obedience corresponds to this motif in the Noah story (cf. 6:22; 7:5). Including Lot in the company apparently does not conflict with the idea of doing as Yahweh had said; as Abraham’s nephew, he counts as a member of Abraham’s own household.[[60]](#footnote-60) The laconic summary again does not convey the magnitude of the venture. It means another 400-500 miles of travel, a perhaps a more demanding (and perhaps more dangerous) journey that involved climbing some mountain ridges and descending into some valleys. Towards the end, simply the descent from the Golan Heights into the depths of the Jordan Valley and up the other side of that valley into Canaan proper at the point now called the Bridge of Jacob’s Daughter--if we imagine them taking that route—would have been a nightmare as well as an excitement. Given that the ages in the Abraham story have moved closer to the ages that would fit the listeners’ experience and that Abraham will be 175 when he dies (25:7), one could perhaps think of him as 35 or 40 in literal terms at this point.

**12:5-8.** A resumptive summary introduces the more detailed accountof the more significantlatter stages of the journey. It makes explicit that they indeed took everything they possessed. They have apparently done well in Harran. While they are not permitted to stay there, they are not required to leave anything behind, though the need to take Lot and his flocks and herds and tents will cause complications later (13:5-7). The other people Abraham takes are presumably his and Lot’s staff, people such as herdsmen (13:7) with their families. It’s quite an entourage, this wagon-train. Only now is there reference to Canaan as their destination. The audience is invited to imagine them having little clue where they were going until this point, a little like the original North American pioneers making the journey west.

The narrative hastens on (v. 6a), bypassing unnamed the great city of Hazor, which overlooks the unnamed Lake Kinneret and guards this main route, and crossing unnamed the Jezreel valley. The pioneers climb into the Samarian highlands to Shechem between the two mountains where Joshua will proclaim Yahweh’s blessings and curses when he has enabled the Israelites to win their first key victories in Canaan (Josh 8:30-35; cf. Deut 11:29; 27:12). For the audience it would be the first major place of significance that the wagon train would reach. “Site” (*māqôm*) is the ordinary word for a place but also the word for a place of worship, and this connotation will apply in the expression “place at Shechem.” At Tel Balata on the edge of the modern city of Nablus, the location of ancient Shechem, archaeologist George Ernest Wright re-erected a “standing stone” which he inferred would have been there when Abraham arrived.[[61]](#footnote-61) People who stand on the site are looking at something that Abraham would have looked at. What Abraham also saw was a great oak or terebinth that evidently had some religious significance. It was a Teacher’s Oak, perhaps one under which a teacher would sit, as Deborah did (Judg 4:5). One way or another, great trees were places where God met with people and places that thus became sacred (cf. Gen 13:18; 14:13; 18:1; 35:8), though none of Genesis’ references to trees specifically connect them with religious rites.[[62]](#footnote-62)

The Canaanites being then in the country (v. 6b) means it was their sanctuary and their sacred tree. Like the reference to Ur, the assumption that Canaanites are now gone from this area implies a time after the Israelites’ have gained complete control of Canaan. What we know from Genesis so far about the Canaanites is that on one hand they are under God’s curse (9:25) and are due to be the servants of Shem (9:26-27), but that on the other hand they have spread and flourished in the same way as other peoples (10:15-19).While in due course Yahweh will commission the Israelites to implement the curse, and some of the Canaanites will end up as their servants, in Genesis that idea is on hold and relationships between Abraham’s family and the Canaanites are friendly.

Yahweh appears to Abraham (v. 7a) at this Canaanite sanctuary and near this tree. “And appeared” (*wayyērāh*)comes from the verb meaning “see” (*rā’āh*) and both are quite like the words for “teacher” (*môreh*)from the verb “teach” (*yārāh*). Against the background of the reality noted by v. 6b, then, Yahweh not merely speaks; he appears.[[63]](#footnote-63) While he may have appeared to Abraham in a dream, as he does to Jacob (28:10-17), many references to his “appearing” involve only words (e.g., 17:1) and certainly the significance of the revelation is the promise Yahweh gives. Yahweh’s appearing in Genesis is less spectacular than his appearing subsequently in the First Testament, and it is subordinate to his speaking.[[64]](#footnote-64) In this context, then, the implication of the move from “said” (v. 1) to “appeared” (v. 7) is to highlight the further promise that follows. Yahweh is going to give this country to Abraham’s eventual offspring. There is some inevitability about the need to give Abraham’s descendants a country if they are to be a nation, let alone a big nation. “Offspring and land must go together; one without the other is useless and dangerous. How do you work land without children to fill it and care for it? How do you feed children without land? One without the other leads to war raids, poverty, starvation, and slavery.”[[65]](#footnote-65) And territory is even more integral to the notion of nationhood than to being a people. But why this country? The First Testament never answers that question, though it may hint at two reasons. One is its geographical location between the great empires of the Middle East (see Isa 19:23-25). The other is that Yahweh is particularly disgusted with the Canaanites, or at least will be in due course, and Abraham’s descendants will be the means of putting them down; Gen 15:16 will explain why he cannot morally give the country to Abraham at the moment.

Having now a promise and a location (v. 7b), Abraham gets away with erecting his own altar in this Canaanite sanctuary. Constructing an altar is a proper response to Yahweh appearing. There’s no reference to offering sacrifice on this altar, as is the case with most of the altars in Genesis (12:8; 13:18; 26:25; 33:20; 35:1-7; also Exod 17:15). The appearing marks this location as a place where God has broken through from the heavens to the earth. It deserves preserving for that reason, and it deserves marking in light of the possibility that it has become a portal; God might break through here again.

Beth El and Ai (Ha’ay, “The Ruin”) (v. 8) would come next—they precede Shechem in Josh 7—8, when Joshua is coming in the opposite direction. This leg of Abraham’s journey would take only a day or two. When Shechem becomes the first capital of northern Israel (Ephraim), Beth El will be its nearest sanctuary for festivals (1 Kings 12:25-32). If 28:19 indicates that Jacob actually gave the place its name, then Genesis here uses it in anticipation of that naming. “Spreading tents” suggests that the entourage settles here for a while, as the context suggests when the phrase recurs in 26:25; 35:21 (though not 33:19). There’s no reference to Yahweh appearing or speaking here, but there is reference to Abraham worshiping. He names Yahweh here (metaphorically speaking—he didn’t literally use the name, which hasn’t been revealed yet). And he builds another altar. Archaeological investigation suggests there was already a shrine here, so the scenario compares with that at Shechem. The collocation of building an altar and calling out with the name Yahweh points to another significance of altar-building: worship of heart and voice is never enough. Building altars means that body as well as spirit is involved, partly so that other people can see the worship.[[66]](#footnote-66) Both the proclaiming and the altar-building would be an act of witness.[[67]](#footnote-67) Naming Yahweh and building an altar also express the fact that Yahweh is present in this country and claims it, though the promise about blessing implies that this claim need not be exclusivist. Spreading tents, building an altar, and calling out with the name Yahweh[[68]](#footnote-68) bring the story to a neat interim close.

# Genesis 12:9—13:4—The Imperiling of Sarah

## Overview

While there is more of the country for Abraham to name Yahweh’s name over, the opening words of 12:10 indicate the question on which this new section focuses. What is Abraham to do if life is not working out in the country Yahweh has promised?

* Move somewhere else?
* Be economical with the truth to save his skin even if it puts Sarah at risk?
* Hope to do well as a result of his economy?
* Bring trouble on the people who treat him well, and earn their rebuke?
* Go back home with his tail between his legs but with his profit?
* Get back to calling in Yahweh’s name?

“Abram no sooner receives the promise than he has to leave it behind”[[69]](#footnote-69)— or at least he chooses to do so. Has he forgotten the promise? Or has God? But eventually he gets back to Canaan with Sarah and Lot and all his possessions, and moves about through the southland (the Negev) to the last place where he had built an altar, and calls in Yahweh’s name there, recovering the dynamic of 12:1-8.

“There have never been any theologians or other readers whom the passage before us would not have offended.”[[70]](#footnote-70) It is the kind of story where someone takes an action whose consequences they do not foresee, and another action whose consequences they do not foresee, so that they end up in a mess that would have made them not start down this road if they had known where it led…. But in this instance of that dynamic, Yahweh intervenes and things work out all right for everyone, though that aspect of it offends theologians and other readers, too.

## Translation

9Abram moved on, gradually moving on[[71]](#footnote-71) to the southland,[[72]](#footnote-72) 10but there was a famine[[73]](#footnote-73) in the region,[[74]](#footnote-74) and Abram went down to Miṣrayim to reside as an alien there, because the famine was severe in the region. 11As he was near arriving in Miṣrayim, he said to Śaray his wife, “Here, please: I know[[75]](#footnote-75) that you’re a woman who’s attractive in appearance. 12When the Miṣrites see you and say, ‘She’s his wife,’ they may kill me and let you live.[[76]](#footnote-76) 13Please say that you’re my sister, in order that things may be good for me because of you and I myself may live thanks to you.” 14So when Abram came to Miṣrayim, the Miṣrites saw that the woman was very attractive, 15Par‘oh’s officials[[77]](#footnote-77) saw her and praised her to Par‘oh, and the woman was taken into Par‘oh’s household.16And for Abram things were good because of her; he had flock, herd, donkeys, servants, maidservants, female donkeys, and camels.

17But Yahweh brought major afflictions on Par‘oh and his household on account of Śaray, Abram’s wife. 18Par‘oh called for Abram and said, “What is this that you’ve done to me? Why didn’t you tell me that she was your wife? 19Why is it that you said ‘She’s my sister,’ so I got her for myself as a wife? Now, here’s your wife, get her and go.” 20Par‘oh gave men orders concerning him and sent him off, with his wife and all that he had. 13:1So Abram went up from Miṣrayim, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, to the southland.

2Now Abram was a very substantial man in livestock, in silver, and in gold. 3In his movings on, he went from the southland as far as Bet-el, as far as the site where his tent had been formerly, between Bet-el and Ha’ay, 4the site of the altar that he had made there at first. There Abram called out with the name Yahweh.

## Interpretation

In MT the stories of the Egyptian escapade and of the subsequent parting from Lot form one unit, but they look like two separate stories dealing with interestingly opposite questions—the problem of scarcity and the problem of abundance. Both stories also link with the sections on either side, in 12:1-8 and 14:1-24. The medieval chapter division in English and Hebrew Bibles does separate the scarcity story and the abundance story, but it does so rather early; 13:1 links backwards, taking Abraham’s family and the narrative back to where it started in 12:9. While one could then see the narrative arc as ending at 13:1, 13:2-4 continues to relate to that arc in the sense that it takes Abraham and the audience back to where we were in 12:8. And one clue to the story’s interpretation is a set of comparisons and contrasts with 12:1-8:

12:1 Yahweh tells Abraham to go 12:9 Abraham continues to go

12:2-3 Yahweh makes promises 12:10a Yahweh is silent[[78]](#footnote-78)

12:4 Abraham goes as Yahweh said 12:10b Abraham goes

12:6 The Canaanites are there 12:10-13 The Egyptians are there

12:7 Yahweh appears and speaks 12:14-17 Yahweh is silent but brings afflictions

12:7, 8 Abraham builds altars 12:18-20 Abraham builds nothing

12:8 Abraham calls in Yahweh’s name 13:1-4 Abraham returns and calls in Yahweh’s name

If 12:1-8 is programmatic for Abraham’s story, so is 12:9—13:4.[[79]](#footnote-79)

The story starts from the way God’s promises may not find fulfillment in the way one might reasonably expect, from the way people sometimes cope with that experience, and from the way God sometimes deals with the consequences of their actions for the sake of his wider purpose. Abraham starts off by trying to do the responsible and right thing, but gets himself into a mess from which Yahweh rescues him without rebuking him. *GenR* 40:1 comments that Psalm 33:18-19 “refers to Abraham”:

Yahweh’s eye is on people who revere him,

on people who wait for his commitment,

To rescue them from death,

to keep them alive when food is gone. (Ps 33:18-19)

It’s not obvious that at this moment he is one who “reveres” or “waits”; the story does not aim to provide readers with either a good or a bad example of faithfulness. It’s about God’s faithfulness to his purpose, even when his people are unfaithful. It’s less an account of a trial of Abraham’s faith than an indication of how the God who gave Abraham his promises “now also watches over him and his wife, to the extent even of rescuing him from dangers which he has brought on himself.”[[80]](#footnote-80) Thus “may God be true, but every human being a liar” (Rom 3:4, quoting Ps 116:11).

As commonly happens in a story, the movement from question to answer is complicated. Further, the narrative often does not comment on what people are thinking. Two pieces of speech dominate the story, one by Abraham, one by Pharaoh, and both look for a response, but neither gets a response in words, only in action. One has to see what can be inferred from their actions, which may show what the people are thinking. The questions and the responses and their possible implications then are:

Question: What is Abraham to do about the food shortage?

Response: Take everyone to Egypt.

Implication: There was nothing wrong with this action?

Question: Unexpected problem: what’s he to do about the danger there?

Response: Say Sarah is his sister.

Implication: Sarah agrees?

Question: Unexpected problem: what’s he to do about Sarah getting put in the harem?

Response: Collect the money.

Implication: He can congratulate himself and thank God?

Question: Unexpected problem: what’s he to do about Pharaoh’s rebuke?

Response: Take the money and run.

Implication: He needs to get back to the way things were.

The lack of overt response to the words of Abraham and Pharaoh means that their words stand with force in their own right, inviting a response from the audience: what do you think of what Abraham says—what would you say if you were Sarah? What do you think of what Pharaoh says—what would you say if you were Abraham?

The story anticipates the later story of Abraham’s descendants’ stay in Egypt. Again a shortage of food will drive people to go there. Again they will be resident aliens there rather than citizens (cf. 15:13). Again they will bring affliction on Pharaoh and his household. Again Pharaoh will send them off and they will go up from Egypt enriched. If Israelites in Egypt knew this story, it could encourage them to see that their ancestors have been this way before and Yahweh has made things work out. For a later audience that colludes with the storyteller in listening through the story in Exodus as if they don’t know the outcome, this earlier story makes the same promise to them.

**12:9-10**. Abraham and his company did not settle near Beth El for long. Whereas “spreading tents” in v. 8 suggested stopping for a while, “moved on, gradually moving on” implies setting up the encampment at a series of different places. It might suggest that they were simply moving around as nomadic shepherds do. But they needed to enter into symbolic if discrete possession of Canaan as a whole. It’s another thirty miles from Beth El to Mamre, where Abraham will settle in Gen 13, and another thirty to Beer Sheba in the Negev, where he will settle later. Beer Sheba will mark the traditional southernmost boundary of the country in Israelite times, but there is neither biblical nor archaeological indication of there being a town at Beer Sheba in Abraham’s day. And neither Mamre nor Beer Sheba is mentioned, as Dan had not been mentioned when they arrived in Canaan, and as Jerusalem is unmentioned as they make the journey south.

But now there is a different reason not to settle (v. 10a). Food shortage is a recurring issue in the First Testament (e.g., 26:1; 42:5; 43:1; Ruth 1:1). The mountain country where Shechem, Beth El, and Mamre are located (which is also the main area where Abraham’s descendants will eventually settle and is thus where many people in the audience live) is marginal land. The area roughly corresponds to the “West Bank” or the Palestinian territory. Water rights are still an issue here. The east side of the mountain ridge gets minimal rain and supports only shepherding; in First Testament times much of the west side was forest and even the area where one might grow some wheat did not get rain consistently enough for people to be sure of a crop every year. In order to call this a land flowing with milk and sweetness one might need to include the plains; likewise in order to make it reasonable to see a poor harvest as something extraordinary that might have been brought about as God’s chastisement for the people’s waywardness, as it sometimes was (e.g., 2 Sam 21; 1 Kings 8:35-37). And the further south Abraham would go, the drier the land would become. Yet food shortage fits ill with the promises Yahweh has made to Abraham. So what is Abraham to do? Is Yahweh testing him?[[81]](#footnote-81) The temptation to act on the basis of non-trust comes after a great act of trust.[[82]](#footnote-82) But Genesis makes no comment on what God was doing in letting the shortage strike Abraham nor on whether Abraham was doing the right thing. Looking back from 1 Kings 8:35-37, one could think that he might have talked to Yahweh about it. Yet there is no reference to calling in Yahweh’s name between 12:8 and 13:4.

The repetition of reference to the food shortage (v. 10b) implies that they tried to cope with it for a while, but eventually the situation became impossible. In good times the Canaanites might be prepared to barter grain with Abraham, but perhaps not in tough times. So Abraham’s family and staff have nothing to eat. What is Abraham to do? Ironically, before Yahweh’s summons to Canaan and his making his promises, Abraham lived in a region where water was not so much of an issue because of the presence of the two great Mesopotamian rivers. The Nile likewise made Egypt’s position less vulnerable than Canaan’s (the Egyptians viewed rain as a second-best substitute for the Nile). It made Egypt a natural direction to look during a food shortage, as it will be in the Joseph story; one then “goes down” from mountainous Canaan to Egypt (and “goes up” from Egypt to Canaan). A letter from an Egyptian border official in about Moses’s time refers to Bedouin-type Edomites seeking entry to Egypt “to keep them alive and to keep their cattle alive.”[[83]](#footnote-83) To speak of “residing as an alien” (*gûr*, with the noun *gēr*) in Egypt presupposes the position of people who live in a country that is not their own, who are not citizens. It is the position of Abraham’s people in Canaan (23:4; 35:27; more generally Exod 6:4) but also in the various other places where they go (e.g., Gen 21:23; 26:3).

**12:11-16.** Perhaps Abraham has not thought through how things would work out. If in real terms Abraham is the equivalent of 35 to 40, Sarah might be 30 to 35 and maybe looks better than the average woman of that age because she has not gone through half a dozen pregnancies or more.[[84]](#footnote-84)

Is there any reason for Abraham’s fear of the Egyptians (v. 12)? Similar words about killing and letting live recur in Exod 1:16, 22, so maybe Abraham is being realistic[[85]](#footnote-85)—at least to a later audience it might seem so. *GenAp* 19 has the danger revealed to Abraham in a dream,[[86]](#footnote-86) which excuses Abraham from responsibility for deceit,[[87]](#footnote-87) makes Sarah cry, and has Pharaoh indeed minded to kill Abraham. But in Genesis itself, Pharaoh’s later protest in vv. 18-19 hardly supports Abraham’s fear.[[88]](#footnote-88) What is its basis? Is Abraham simply fearful of “the other”? It’s said that men are ambivalent about their wives’ attractiveness and sexuality. It makes a man feel good to have other men fancy his wife but it also feels a bit dangerous.[[89]](#footnote-89) If Abraham feels this ambivalence, it will turn out that he is justified, though his action perhaps implies that he doesn’t take into account the promise in v. 3. He evidently cannot assume patriarchal authority over Sarah (it’s not the last story that will indicate it); he has to make nice in order to win her cooperation. He needs to say “please” more than once.[[90]](#footnote-90)

His scheme (v. 13) will involve being economical with the truth in either the narrower or the looser sense. “Sister” can suggest “sweetheart” (e.g., Song of Songs 4:9-10),[[91]](#footnote-91) and later Abraham will claim that Sarah is his (half-)sister and she will confirm it (20:1-18), so maybe he is revealing only one of the relevant facts. But we don’t know if they are both lying on that later occasion. Genesis never tells us her parents’ identity. And Genesis may look at Abraham (or Abraham might look at himself) the same way Exodus looks at the midwives in Exod 2:15-22: one does not owe truthfulness to people who are using their power in an untruthful way. But does he not recognize that his scheme for protecting himself imperils Sarah? It will transpire that things go very well for Abraham. But in the first instance, by “things being good” Abraham simply means he won’t get killed (the same parallelism comes in Jer 38:20).[[92]](#footnote-92) Perhaps he doesn’t imagine simply surrendering Sarah to some other man but being able as her brother to fend off suitors.[[93]](#footnote-93) Sarah apparently agrees; her “silent acquiescence… contrasts markedly with the enterprising initiatives of the women who birthed the Exodus narrative, those shrewd quick-thinking midwives, and its celebrator, the daringly outspoken Miriam.”[[94]](#footnote-94) She was “faced with a Sophie’s Choice” and “she did what she had to do. If sleeping with the enemy would save Abraham and get then through the famine, so be it.”[[95]](#footnote-95)

Events confirm Abraham’s assessment of his wife’s attractiveness and its results (vv. 14-15).[[96]](#footnote-96) If Abraham isn’t very patriarchal, Sarah has to deal with the patriarchal state of the world in general and of politics in particular. Perhaps Abraham had not worked out that it would be Pharaoh’s staff who took a fancy to Sarah on their master’s behalf. An important person like a pharaoh keeps a harem as a mark of his status, and Sarah has to join it. Maybe she never actually meets Pharaoh, perhaps because she will need a six-month beauty treatment like Esther,[[97]](#footnote-97) though at least moving into Pharaoh’s household will give her the chance to develop a distaste for Egyptian idolatry, garlic, and onions.[[98]](#footnote-98) A poem attributed to Ephrem imagines Sarah’s own opinions on this entire episode.[[99]](#footnote-99) But the story does not look at things from her viewpoint, and neither do Abraham or Pharaoh.[[100]](#footnote-100) It does indicate an ambiguity about both the men she is involved with, in the way they treat her. And “the confrontation between Abram and Pharaoh does not end with the defeat of the wicked and the triumph of the upright. The central protagonists remain morally ambiguous.”[[101]](#footnote-101)

Abraham does well out of the scheme (v. 16). He is treated as his sister’s guardian and he receives the kind of wedding gifts that a wealthy man would give. Flocks cover sheep and goats; herds cover oxen, bulls, and cows; (male) donkeys carry things; female donkeys carry people; camels carry both. Camels appear several times in Genesis but there is little other evidence for them in Canaan until after Moses’s day, so they may be another result of the story being told in terms that work for the listeners. Either way, they are a marker of distinctive prosperity.

**12:17—13:1.** What were Abraham and Sarah thinking? And what actually happened in the harem? We don’t discover the answer to these questions, but we do get an indication of what Yahweh is thinking. It won’t be the last time in Genesis that Yahweh is absent when there is trouble but then intervenes.[[102]](#footnote-102) He is not prepared to surrender Sarah, as Abraham is. Sarah is integral to the plan Yahweh has formulated, which he announced in 12:2. Genesis draws attention to the real point about Sarah’s relationship to Abraham. She is his wife, whether or not she is his sister. “Afflictions” is nicely the term that accompanies reference to food shortage in 1 Kings 8:35-37, with a hint that Abraham has brought trouble on the Egyptians in order to try to resolve the trouble he was in, though the vast bulk of occurrences of the term come in Lev 13—14 to describe the skin ailment commonly termed leprosy. It wouldn’t be surprising if these afflictions were venereal disease, which would inhibit sexual activity and thus protect Sarah.[[103]](#footnote-103) But more scarily for an Egyptian, the next time the Torah refers to an “affliction,” it is the death of Egypt’s firstborn (Exod 11:1). And like that trouble, this trouble comes because God acts, not because wrongdoing “naturally” has its outworking. As usual, adversity for a leader means adversity for his household, as blessing for a leader means blessing for his household. Yahweh is evidently not troubled about the “unfairness” involved in his treatment of Pharaoh and the Egyptians. There are bigger issues at stake. And presumably the afflictions disappear once the Egyptians have got rid of Abraham and Sarah.

We do discover what Pharaoh was thinking (vv. 18-19). While Gen 12 has not previously referred to the call of Abraham, it now does, but it is Pharaoh who does the calling. We don’t discover how Pharaoh learned the fuller truth about Sarah’s status (contrast 20:1-3). We do see Pharaoh doing the right thing, which is also the thing that is in his interest. “The Egyptian emerges rather saintly, but Abram, the one in whom the Egyptians and other nations are to be blessed, appears rather sinister.”[[104]](#footnote-104) Indeed, he brings curse rather than blessing.

So Pharaoh sends Abraham off (12:20—13:1), as Yahweh God sent off Adam and Eve from his garden (3:23). They return to the southland,[[105]](#footnote-105) to where things started to go wrong, and to where the story can get back on track. Genesis draws attention to the combined presence of Abraham and his possessions and Sarah and Lot, as in 12:5.

**13:2-4.** Abraham’s livestock will include the ones given him by Pharaoh as a wedding gift for Sarah. Perhaps the same applies to the silver and gold,[[106]](#footnote-106) if the anticipation of the exodus holds further: see Exod 11:2, just after the reference to affliction (also 3:22; 12:35; also Gen 20:16; and the description of wedding gifts in 24:53). Getting back to the southland, he resumes his Bedouin-like “moving on” but retraces his footsteps back to where he was in 12:8, back to the altar he had set up there, and back to doing his own calling, with Yahweh’s name,[[107]](#footnote-107) as he had earlier called out there. Yes, the story is back on track.

# Genesis 13:5-18—The Scarcity of Land

## Overview

In a sense, the problem in this next story is the problem of abundance, in that both Abraham and Lot have many flocks and herds and people. But in another sense it is again the problem of scarcity, in that there are not enough resources to fulfill the needs that follow. What is Abraham to do when the resultant twofold problem issues in conflict within the extended family? The answer is, split, and be generous: let Lot choose the land he wants and Abraham will go elsewhere. That generosity solves the problem of conflict. But Abraham’s action again has unforeseen consequences. One is that Lot chooses to go and live near the wicked city of Sodom. Another is that he has left Abraham without a possible heir.[[108]](#footnote-108) But yet another is a renewed and more explicit promise by Yahweh to Abraham.

## Translation

5Now Lot, who went with Abram, also had flock and herd and tents, 6and the region couldn’t support them living as one, because their property was great. So they couldn’t live as one, 7and there was argument between the herdsmen of Abram’s livestock and the herdsmen of Lot’s livestock; the Kena‘anite (the Perizzite)[[109]](#footnote-109) was then living in the region. 8So Abram said to Lot, “Please, there mustn’t be arguing between me and you and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen, because we’re men who are brothers.[[110]](#footnote-110) 9The entire country is before you, isn’t it? Part from me, please: if you go north, I’ll go south, but if you go south, I’ll go north.”[[111]](#footnote-111) 10Lot lifted his eyes and looked at the entire Yarden area, that it was well-watered, all of it, before Yahweh devastated Sedom and Amorah—like Yahweh’s garden, like the country of Miṣrayim, as you come to Ṣo’ar; 11and Lot chose for himself the entire Yarden area.

So Lot moved on east,[[112]](#footnote-112) and they parted, each from his brother. 12Whereas Abram lived in the country of Kena‘an, Lot lived in the towns in the area and put up his tents near Sedom. 13Now the people of Sedom were bad, wrongdoers in relation to Yahweh, greatly.

14But Yahweh said[[113]](#footnote-113) to Abram after Lot parted from him, “Lift your eyes, please, and look, from the site where you are, to the north, to the south, to the east, and to the west,[[114]](#footnote-114) 15because the entire country that you’re looking at—I will give it to you and to your offspring, through the ages.[[115]](#footnote-115) 16I will make your offspring like the earth’s dirt, so if a person could count the earth’s dirt, your offspring will also be counted. 17Set off, walk about in the country, through its length and its width, because I will give it to you.”

18Abram moved his tents and came and lived by the Mamre Oaks,[[116]](#footnote-116) which were at Hebron, and built an altar for Yahweh there.

## Interpretation

Like 12:10—13:4, this narrative takes off from 12:1-9. Yahweh’s promise of blessing is finding fulfillment, but once again Abraham faces a situation in which Yahweh’s promise about the land is not working out. In the course of the story Yahweh reaffirms that promise and Abraham again spreads his tents by some impressive trees and again builds an altar, near Mamre—which he must have passed as he moved to the Southland (12:9) but which was not mentioned.

The story also parallels 12:10—13:4 in that it tells of a problem that Abraham has to face; this time the specific carryover from 12:1-9 is not Sarah but Lot. It once again recounts how Abraham proposes a risky solution to the problem that arises. Once again Abraham acts without consulting Yahweh, though there would hardly be any suggestion that he acted wrongly. Once again his solution, while risky for Abraham, is also (perhaps less obviously) risky for the one to whom he proposes it; the narrator eventually draws attention to the risk. Once again Yahweh intervenes on Abraham’s behalf. Once again the story closes with Abraham moving and reaching out to Yahweh.

The story also prepares the way for the next chapter (see 14:12) and for Gen 18—19. It breaks into five paragraphs:

Vv. 5-7: The problem

Vv. 8-9: Abraham proposes a solution

Vv. 10-13 Lot accepts the proposal, but the narrator draws attention to a snag

Vv. 14-17 Yahweh renews and expands on his promise to Abraham

V. 18 Abraham moves to live near Mamre.

Genesis tells us little about the quarrel itself (TgNeoph and TgPsJ make up for this lack), which puts the focus on Abraham’s solution, Lot’s decision, and Yahweh’s promise which follow.

It’s great when brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, can live as one (Ps 133) but it’s not always possible. When there’s a problem, the answer may be to give up trying and part amicably, which may work out fine (Acts 15:36-40), though it may not…. Whereas in the previous story Abraham perhaps tried to do the responsible but risky thing and got himself into a mess out of which Yahweh rescued him without rebuking him, in this story he tries to do the responsible but risky thing and thereby gives Lot the chance to get himself into a mess out of which Yahweh will rescue him, and finds Yahweh reaffirming his commitment to him. In light of the way things work out, however, does Abraham too easily let Lot go off down to Sodom? The story “depicts the tragedy associated with separation from the family of Abram.”[[117]](#footnote-117)

**13:5-7**. Both branches of Nahor’s family have increased their livestock and tents (i.e., the families that live in them),[[118]](#footnote-118) and within this extended family, the relationship between Abraham and Lot is a little ambiguous. Abraham is Lot’s uncle and guardian, but Lot is evidently also the head of his own household and entourage, no doubt partly inherited from his father Haran. “As long as Abraham and Lot were not too rich, their shepherds were able to get along easily”; but flourishing brings its problems (a story set in Europe would then decide things by means of a duel).[[119]](#footnote-119) The Beth El area where the two companies are living is too confined for them. Towns such as Beth El are Canaanite settlements, in the broad sense of the word “Canaanite” as denoting the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the land in general. Perizzite is a more specific term. It usually comes only in strings of descriptions of those pre-Israelite inhabitants (e.g., 15:20), and it is similar to a word for villagers (*pᵉrāzîm*, peraz-ites). But the three times when it occurs outside of those strings of terms all suggest a geographical link with the Beth El-Shechem area (see 34:30; Josh 17:15; Judg 1:4-5).[[120]](#footnote-120) The term thus fits here as a more specific description of the Canaanites who lived in this region. Such settled peoples (as opposed to groups that focused more on shepherding) would control the areas around their towns and would pasture their own flocks there. The area further away from their towns to the east led down the mountain slopes in wilderness land which would have less grass and less water (that’s why the towns were not there). One can see how Abraham and Lot could have a problem.

**13:8-9.** So Abraham proposes a solution for the problem over grazing. Lot is as much an heir to Yahweh’s promise about the land as Abraham is. He could go north to the Shiloh, Shechem, or Samaria region, in which case Abraham could go south down the mountain ridge to Mamre or Beer Sheba; or the other way around. Lot can choose. Twice Abraham says “please,” as he did to Sarah. Does it indicate that Abraham is a wimp who doesn’t like conflict (Gen 16 will support that idea)? Or is he just being polite? Is he being generous? Or does he simply need to solve a problem? Is his offer an expression of his trust in God’s promise? There is no more indication of that possibility than there was of his having a failure of trust in 12:10. In this story, Yahweh’s affirmation of his promise follows on his suggestion to Lot, rather than being the basis of it.

**13:10-13**. Perhaps, then, “with typical ancient Near Eastern obsequiousness, Abram defers to his nephew to decide which portion of the land to take,” which should lead to Lot deferring to Abraham (cf. the courteous negotiation in Gen 23). But “shockingly, he agrees to make the selection himself” and promptly chooses the Jordan valley, “leaving the dry and rocky hill country to his uncle.”[[121]](#footnote-121) Lot does not look either north or south but east. Beth El is near a crossroads on the ridge; one road wends its way down into the Jordan Valley and another wends its way towards the Mediterranean, as it does today (nowadays Jerusalem is the best-known crossroads, but this change issued from Jerusalem’s own development as Israel’s capital). In the wilderness to the east shepherds would have less competition, but what strikes Lot is that getting to the bottom of the precipitous mountain slopes (the land falls 4000 feet in ten or fifteen miles) means reaching country watered by springs and by the Jordan itself. It is the southernmost, wide, flat-bottomed vale through which the Jordan runs as it reaches the Dead Sea. Taking “the Jordan area” to denote this vale makes geographical sense. It would be odd to think that the term included the Dead Sea itself (cf. Deut 34:3). With regard to the Dead Sea area, the narrator might imply a contrast between the landscape at this time and in the narrator and audience’s day, when things are pretty arid, though even in the audience’s day there were the fabulous oases at Ein Feshka and Ein Gedi (“the best place in the world and… a remnant of Paradise”)[[122]](#footnote-122) as there are now, and there are freshwater springs southeast of the Dead Sea. But maybe Sodom, Gomorrah, and Zo’ar were north of the Dead Sea (there is no consensus on their location), and the area around Jericho which people come to when they go down that road from Beth El is an oasis, then and now. One can follow Lot’s gaze as he sees and realizes how fantastic the landscape is.[[123]](#footnote-123) It is so well-watered, which is one of the first things any settler has to think about (especially a shepherd). It could remind someone of Egypt, which was such a contrast with the Negev: as Egypt has the Nile as its water supply, this land has the Jordan and the springs. Indeed, it’s like Yahweh’s garden! That expression did not come in Gen 2—3, but those chapters were talking about something you could call Yahweh’s garden. And whether or not this comparison is Lot’s perspective, it is that of the narrator and the audience, especially if they read Genesis sequentially. In speaking of devastation the narrator also reminds the audience of the deluge story, as well as anticipating Gen 18—19 with its references to Sodom and Gomorrah; the area around Zo’ar also gets mention as favored because it is going to be significant later (see 19:22).

Logically enough, then, Lot elects to move down into the Jordan Valley (vv. 11-12). If Sodom was further south, his moving there presumably implies that in those days it was just as hospitable as Jericho. But is he thereby moving out of the promised land?

And didn’t he know what sort of people lived there (v. 13)? The description of them recalls the description of the entire world before the deluge, and thus provides a further anticipation of the story that will follow in Gen 18—19. How strange that this Paradise-like land should be inhabited by such bad people![[124]](#footnote-124) TgOnq specifies that their wrongdoing involved their use of money and of their bodies, which fits the description in Gen 18 with its pointing to the cry of the oppressed and to sexual waywardness (TgNeoph has sexual sin, murder, and idolatry, which matches the regular Jewish definition of basic sins, and TgPsJ combines both expansions).[[125]](#footnote-125) It will turn out that “his ‘seeing’ and his knowing are too limited.”[[126]](#footnote-126) Lot is “one of those people destined repeatedly to make bad choices.”[[127]](#footnote-127) He has and he raises “boundary issues.”[[128]](#footnote-128)

**13:14-17**. As is often the case, the narrative does not make the link with this next paragraph explicit. It leaves the listeners to think about possible links. Is Yahweh responding with generosity to Abraham’s generosity? Is he responding to Abraham’s risk-taking? Is he responding to Lot’s taking what looks like superb land? Is he simply reaffirming the promise in a way that relates to his own purpose? Or is he implying that Lot has just forfeited any share in the land promised to Abraham?[[129]](#footnote-129) His formulation of the promise is markedly different from that in 12:1-3, where he made no commitment regarding land (it came only in 12:7). Here his words follow on what proceeds. Lot had lifted his eyes and looked; now Yahweh invites Abraham to lift his eyes and look (this expression comes only here in Gen 1—17). Yahweh speaks politely (“please”) as Abraham did to Sarah and to Lot (only four times does God say “please,” each time when asking someone to believe or do something outrageous—cf. 15:5; 22:2; Exod 11:2).[[130]](#footnote-130) Yahweh refers to the “site” where Abraham is; that word comes in Gen 1—17 only in connection with the places where Abraham worships, at Shechem and at Beth El. Abraham had pointed out that the entire country was before Lot (there is no better place to look in all four directions than the mountain ridge near Beth El);[[131]](#footnote-131) Yahweh draws Abraham’s attention to the entire country before him. Abraham had invited Lot to think about north and south, up and down the mountain range, and Lot had looked east; Yahweh invites Abraham to look north, south, east, and west. As was the case in Abraham’s words to Lot, Yahweh’s words engage with the listeners’ knowledge or imagination. In speaking of the points of the compass, his words picture mountains, valley, and sea (the word for “west” is “sea” and the word for “north” is “Zaphon,” the great mountain to the far north). Abraham draws Lot’s attention to the entire country because he is prepared to give it to Lot; Yahweh draws Abraham’s attention to it because he is prepared to give it to Abraham and to his offspring as a permanent possession (*‘ad ‘ôlām*), to last as long as his pact with Noah. Yahweh is matching Abraham’s generosity, except that he is vastly exceeding it. One can imagine this promise causing some puzzlement and heartache for (say) the much reduced Ephraimite state on the eve of its actual demise in 722, or the much reduced Judahite state later, or the little Babylonian and then Persian province in the sixth or fifth century. But it might also inspire hope for them.

Yahweh promises the land to Abraham’s “offspring” (v. 15). In Gal 3:16 Paul takes up the fact that the word is singular (Hebrew *zera‘*, Greek *sperma* ), which fits the fact that *the* offspring of Abraham is the one person Jesus. The Hebrew word (*zera‘*) is collective; it is used just once to refer to seeds for sowing (1 Sam 8:15), though in everyday life that usage will have been common. The Greek word is also commonly collective, though the plural reference to seeds for sowing is more common in the New Testament. But no one would think that the singular word in Hebrew or in Greek would denote one offspring as opposed to many. Like much of the New Testament’s use of the Scriptures, Paul is starting from something he knows (one descendant of Abraham was key to the fulfillment of God’s promises) and working back to identify something that must have been in the back of God’s mind in making this promise and in inspiring this particular scripture.

Many offspring will be needed to occupy this land, and they will be given, too (v. 16). It’s more common for dirt to be a discouraging image (cf. 18:27), but it can be encouraging (28:14; Num 23:10). This commitment, too, would inspire puzzlement and heartache and hope. There’s some irony about this promise when size has been the problem which gave rise to the quarrel.[[132]](#footnote-132) Perhaps we should put the logic the other way around. Don’t worry about not having enough land because there are too many people. There will be much land, and therefore there can be many people.

So Abraham, too, is to set off (v. 17) and move around the country some more, both length and width. It is not merely so that he can exercise his own imagination, like Moses viewing the promised land. It is by walking across a tract of land that one takes possession of it.[[133]](#footnote-133)

**13:18.** The step Abraham takes as a consequence is tiny. It’s really his offspring who will cash Yahweh’s check. Abraham simply moves again southwards half way to Beer Sheba and settles for a while at Mamre, which is then identified with the later Hebron. The Mamre Oaks are two or three miles north of Hebron itself, according to which tradition you follow. Mamre appears only in Genesis; in Genesis Hebron appears only to explain the location of Mamre to a later generation.

# Genesis 14:1-24—The Empire Strikes Back

## Overview

Gen 10—13 first told of developments in the audience’s entire world, following on humanity’s new start after the deluge, and then segued into a focus on Abraham’s family. Gen 14 returns for a moment to that broader world, because Abraham is drawn into an involvement outside the family. The story’s question then is, what will happen when the empire strikes back?

“The empire” is a coalition of kings. As is the case in Gen 10—11, not all their kingdoms can be identified, though they include two that appeared there, Shinar (which had been the starting point of Nimrod’s empire) and Elam (cf. 10:10, 22; 11:2). But the phrase “the empire strikes back” sometimes refers to the subjects of an empire asserting themselves against the imperial power, and in Gen 14 both references apply. Five city-states in the Dead Sea area lived under the yoke of imperial authority for over a decade, but then rebelled (strike back one). The imperial coalition engages in a wide-ranging and successful campaign to reassert its authority (strike back two). But it makes the mistake of including among its captives from Sodom someone from Abraham’s family, which leads to Abraham pursuing the coalition force and defeating it (strike back three). On his return, Abraham is acknowledged by the priest-king of Salem (to whom he pays a tithe of his plunder) and by the king of Sodom (to whom he insists on returning the rest, less expenses).

## Translation

1In the time of Amrapel king of Šin’ar, Aryok king of Ellasar,[[134]](#footnote-134) Kedorla‘omer king of Elam, and Tid’al king of nations, 2they[[135]](#footnote-135) did battle with Bera king of Sedom, Birša king of Amorah, Šin’ab king of Admah, Šem’eber king of Ṣeboyim, and the king of Bela (i.e., Ṣo’ar). 3All these[[136]](#footnote-136) joined together in the Siddim Vale (i.e., the Salt Sea). 4For twelve years they had served Kedorla‘omer, but the thirteenth year, they rebelled.

5In the fourteenth year, Kedorla‘omer and the kings who were with him came and struck down the Repa’ites at Ašterot Qarnayim, the Zuzites at Ham, the Emim at Qiryatayim Plain, 6and the Horites in their highland, Se‘ir as far as Pa’ran Oak, which is near the wilderness. 7They went back and came to Decision Spring (i.e., Qadeš), and struck down the entire area[[137]](#footnote-137) of the Amaleqites, and also the Amorites who were living in Ḥaṣaṣon Tamar.

8Then the king of Sedom, the king of Amorah, the king of Admah, the king of Ṣeboyim, and the king of Bela (i.e., Ṣo’ar) went out, and lined up with them for battle in the Siddim Vale: 9Kedorla‘omer king of Elam, Tidal king of nations, Amrapel king of Šin’ar, and Aryok king of Ellasar, four kings against the five. 10Now the Siddim Vale was pit after pit[[138]](#footnote-138) of bitumen; the kings of Sedom and Amorah fled and fell into them,[[139]](#footnote-139) while the rest fled to the highland. 11They[[140]](#footnote-140) got all the property of Sedom and Amorah and all their food, and went.

12So they got Lot and his property, the son of Abram’s brother, and went; he was living in Sedom. 13Someone who escaped came and told Abram the Ibrite. He was dwelling by the Oaks of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eškol and brother of Aner; these were holders of a pact with Abram.

14So Abram heard that his brother had been taken captive, and he unleashed[[141]](#footnote-141) his trained men (people born in his household),[[142]](#footnote-142) 318 of them, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. 15He and his servants split up against them by night, struck them down, and pursued them as far as Ḥobah, which is north of Dammeseq. 16He took back all the property, and took back both his brother Lot and his property, and also the women and the company.

17The king of Sedom went out to meet him after he got back from striking down Kedor-la‘omer and the kings that were with him, in the Šaveh Vale[[143]](#footnote-143) (i.e., the King’s Vale), 18and Melki-ṣedeq king of Śalem brought out bread and wine (he was priest[[144]](#footnote-144) of El Elyon) 19and blessed him:

Blessed be Abram by El Elyon,

generator of heavens and earth,

20And El Elyon be blessed,

who has unshielded[[145]](#footnote-145) your attackers into your hand.

He gave him a tenth of everything.

21The king of Sedom said to Abram, “Give me the people but take the property for yourself.” 22But Abram said to the king of Sedom, “I am raising my hand to Yahweh,[[146]](#footnote-146) El Elyon, generator of heavens and earth: 23’From a thread to a boot strap,[[147]](#footnote-147) if I get anything of yours….’[[148]](#footnote-148) So you will not say, ‘I’m the one who made Abram wealthy.’ 24Nothing for me,[[149]](#footnote-149) only what the boys have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me, Aner, Eškol, and Mamre – they may get their share.”

## Interpretation

Only in this chapter does the Abraham narrative refer to events and nations in the international context. In theory it might enable one to relate the Genesis narrative to a more specific context in the time before Moses, but actually we know virtually nothing about the individuals or the peoples involved in the story. It is “a world of its own.”[[150]](#footnote-150) Presumably the audience suffered from the same ignorance. The narrator either had some historical information that we cannot control, or created the narrative out of an inspired imagination to make the story history-like.

It is a long time before we discover how the chapter relates to Abraham. It will turn out that the first half tells the audience the background to that question, and it is a thrilling story in its own right. We first enjoy reading about a rebellion on the part of the city-states down in the Jordan Valley against their overlords from the far north and east, about an expedition on the part of the latter to put the city-states in their place, and about a battle which ends with the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah hiding in bitumen pits and with the eastern kings taking much plunder. Woo hoo! This entertaining story could be complete in its own right, but as the introduction to what follows it functions dramatically as a long raising of suspense. Its links with Gen 10 and specifically with the Nimrod story (as king of Shinar, Amrapel has been identified with Nimrod)[[151]](#footnote-151) suggest that it reaffirms Yahweh’s involvement with developments in the affairs of the nations.[[152]](#footnote-152)

The element in the story that brings it into connection with the Abraham narrative (vv. 12-16), and specifically with Gen 13, is that the overlords also took Lot. Serves him right, because he is now not merely encamped near Sodom but living in Sodom! As happened in Gen 12—13, however, Abraham sees this crisis as requiring action. He pursues the four kings with his citizen’s army, defeats them, and rescues Lot and the rest of the plunder. The story thus portrays Abraham as more dynamic than he was in Gen 12—13, indeed as the kind of figure we read about in Judges.[[153]](#footnote-153) His triumphant return would have made another satisfactory ending to the story, though one might have expected Abraham to call on Yahweh’s name if not to build an altar down in Sodom (cf. 12:7, 8; 13:4, 18).

We do get something equivalent to such a conclusion (vv. 17-24), though it takes a distinctive form. When Abraham returns for his victory parade, the greetings party comprises not only the king of Sodom (who has had a shower in the Dead Sea, though it hasn’t stop him smelling of bitumen) but also the king of Salem. Presumably the scene is therefore on the mountain ridge where Melchizedek lives and where Abraham is on his way home to Mamre. As a priest, Melchizedek can bless Abraham and bless the God who has given Abraham the victory. He thus brings a first fulfillment of the promise in 12:2-3 that there will be people who bless Abraham—indeed, of the promise that his name will be great and of people finding blessing through him. Abraham therefore gives him, as God’s representative, a tithe of the plunder from the battle, though not without nuancing Melchizedek’s description of the deity. The king of Sodom invites him to keep the rest of the plunder; the king has been seen as surly,[[154]](#footnote-154) which would make him an embodiment of the person who “diminishes” Abraham in 12:2-3, but he can as easily be seen as also positively recognizing Abraham[[155]](#footnote-155) and thus as another positive fulfillment of that promise. But Abraham declines, not wanting to be in hock to the king of Sodom. One can imagine that the story spoke to the trickiness and necessary subtlety of relationships with neighbors and their religion and theology in Israel. In addition, the audience knows that the Davidic king is the successor of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4, the only other First Testament reference to him).[[156]](#footnote-156) Abraham is “bowing before the one who is holding the place for the future anointed one.”[[157]](#footnote-157) So one can imagine insights the story might offer in different contexts in Israel’s history, but as usual, the story gives no concrete indication of the context in which it was composed or told.[[158]](#footnote-158)

**14:1-3.** Two of the first four kings come from places we know, Shinar (i.e., Babylonia; cf. 10:10), and Elam (cf. 10:22), to its east. We do not know where Ellasar was, nor who were the “nations” of which Tidal was king. And we have no references to any kings called Amrapel, Aryok, or Kedorla‘omer, though Tid‘al may be equivalent to Tudḫaliaš, the name of four Hittite kings.[[159]](#footnote-159) That link pairs with the tradition locating Ellasar in Turkey[[160]](#footnote-160) and together the four kings might then represent a wide swathe of powers from Turkey through Iraq to Iran, much like the accounts in Gen 10. What is clear is that they represent an impressive coalition from the great imperial centers to the north and east. *GenR* 42:2 comments on how encounters with four kingdoms form a bracket around Israel’s history (cf. Dan 2 and 7).

Their victims (vv. 2-3) are much smaller fry, the kings of little city-states down in the Jordan Valley. We know of Sodom, Gomorrah, and Soar from Gen 13, and Admah and Seboyim from 10:19. All five were presumably located around the Dead Sea (cf. v. 3), but we do not know their precise location. The kings’ names do not occur elsewhere, though it may be no coincidence that Bera sounds like a bad guy (*ra‘*)and Birsha sounds like a faithless guy (*reša‘*). Nor do we know where Siddim Vale was, only that it was in the area of the Dead Sea (which is it Arabic name; “Salt Sea” is the regular Hebrew name).[[161]](#footnote-161) And we have no basis for dating any battle that may have involved these nine kings.

**14:4-7**. Genesis now backtracks to give us the battle’s context. As subjects of Kedorla‘omer, the five city-states’ value may have lain in the area’s mineral resources.

By the next year (vv. 5-6), Kedorla‘omer had got the other kings to ally with him to put the city-states in their place. The kings took their time getting to the Jordan Valley. Perhaps these other peoples had joined in the rebellion, though if so, one might have expected Genesis to say so. Perhaps, then, the kings made their expedition worthwhile by taking over these other places. Or perhaps they were engaging in preemptive strikes to safeguard against these other peoples coming to the five kings’ support. Anyway, they first made their battling way north-south through the highland east of the Jordan and thus above the location of the five towns. Whereas we cannot identify the four kings, their route is broadly identifiable as following the “King’s Highway” (Num 20:17), the main road east of the Jordan for traders and armies. Ashterot Qarnayim is in the Golan, there is a town called Ham not far away, and Se‘ir is further south. Pa’ran extends much further down into Sinai, but at its northern end Pa’ran Oak (*’êl pa’ran*) makes one think of Elat,[[162]](#footnote-162) and the kings might be concerned to assert authority over this further significant point on the trade routes. Presumably Qiryatayim Plain is on the same north-south line, and might well link with the Qiryatayim in Num 32:37. The peoples they defeated there, the Repa’ites, Zuzites/Zamzummites, Emites, and Horites, also appear in Deut 2:10-12, 20-23 as pre-Israelite inhabitants of that area east of the Jordan.

From their furthest point south, the four kings then proceeded northwest (v. 7) to Qadesh, the key town in northern Sinai, a center for the Amaleqites (cf. Num 13:29); the name Decision Spring suggests it was the location for powwow.[[163]](#footnote-163) From Qadesh they swerved back northeast and down into the Jordan Valley to Ḥaṣaṣon Tamar, whose inhabitants are simply designated by the all-purpose term “Amorites.” The place’s name suggests something to do with gravel and something to do with a palm, an odd combination though it fits a location near the Dead Sea. Ḥaṣaṣon Tamar is identified with Ein Gedi in 2 Chron 20:2 (cf. TgOnq here), which makes geographical sense insofar as lower Ein Gedi is on the Dead Sea, though the descent from upper Ein Gedi is perilous.

**14:8-11.** The city-state kings perhaps realize that Kedorla‘omer and company have put down their neighbors and potential allies on all sides, and they have to face up to the four kings on as near as they can get to their own terms. The story leaps over their inevitable defeat to the aftermath. With a smirk on his face the narrator reports how two of the kings jump into bitumen pits to avoid being caught and killed, while the others run for the hills (which the easterners have already captured). Meanwhile, Kedorla‘omer makes off with the plunder which helps make the whole venture worthwhile, and with the food which feeds the army.

**14:12-13.** In itself the story could end there, but it doesn’t. And following on 13:12-13 it might raise the question, what happened to Lot, then? Taking captives is another practice that makes war worthwhile, but the mention of Lot alone reflects the particular interest of the story.

In 13:18 one would have thought that Mamre (v. 13), up on the mountain ridge to the west, was simply a place name, but here it is the name of a person; Mamre’s two brothers also have names that are also names of places. The three are “holders/lords of Abraham’s pact”: that is, Abraham has entered into a mutual alliance with them which among other things would commit them not to attack each other and to watch each other’s backs. In this context, Abraham is called an Ibrite, a “Hebrew.” LXX translates the word “emigrant” or “transient,”[[164]](#footnote-164) which fits its similarity to the Akkadian term ḫabiru (with variants) denoting people who are outsiders in relation to the society in question and of questionable social status; it’s a term like “gypsies.” And within the First Testament it often has this connotation. But in this context, Abraham’s being an Ibrite, a descendant of Eber, is set over against Mamre’s being an Amorite, a descendant of Ham (see Gen 10); so it is more likely an ethnic term.[[165]](#footnote-165)

**14:14-16.** Like the account of the five kings’ defeat,the account of Abraham’s expedition is told briskly, leaving us to fill in the dots. It apparently doesn’t need saying that the people with whom Abraham has a pact will join him in the venture. The narrative also reads as if we know that Abraham’s company is much larger than we might have guessed even from the information that Abraham’s family and Lot’s family cannot all fit in the land around Beth El; 318 implies a total clan in four figures (but further significance in the number 318 may emerge at 15:2). Abraham’s company comprises men who were born and raised in his household as servants, who are therefore unquestionably loyal to him; they are not mercenaries or people whom he captured or bought. They are people he trained or brought up: “Train a youth in connection with his way, and when he is old he will not depart from it” (Prov 22:6). After the four kings have made their triumphant departure from the Dead Sea area by going straight up the Jordan Valley, Abraham catches up with them at what will eventually be the northern border of Israel itself, the natural border between Canaan and Syria. Dan will be its name after the Danites move there in the Judges period. One does wonder what the kings are doing so far north if they are on their way to Damascus, Babylonia, and Elam, though it would be less circuitous a route on the way to Turkey; perhaps they have other conquests in mind.[[166]](#footnote-166)

Abraham and his makeshift army divide into several companies (v. 15), come upon the four kings by night with the advantage of surprise, and turn their orderly march homewards into a flight, for those who are lucky enough not to get struck down. “The victors become the victims.”[[167]](#footnote-167)Whereas Damascus would be on the way home for them (Abraham has presumably not been there since his journey summarized in Gen 12), we don’t know how far beyond Damascus Hobah is.

So Abraham is able to take back Lot and his people (v. 16) and also to take back to the five city-states the property plundered from them and the people who had been captured, including the women whose future life as captives would hardly bear thinking about.[[168]](#footnote-168)

**14:17-20**. Once again, the story could end there, but it doesn’t. It might raise the question, so what happened to all that stuff? Did Abraham just keep it, the same way he kept his (arguably ill-gotten) gains from Pharaoh? The king of Sodom (the story is interested simply in him because of the link with Lot) might be asking himself that question. Was he asking it when he came out and climbed the mountain ridge to meet the returning victor? The Shaveh Vale is mentioned only here in the First Testament, but the King’s Vale with which the narrator identifies it appears in 2 Sam 18:18 as the location of Absalom’s Pillar, which was presumably near Jerusalem, and *GenAp* 22:14 plausibly locates it at Bet-hakkerem.

The appearance of the king of Shalem (v. 18) is then a surprise,[[169]](#footnote-169) but the location at least provides the geographical logic for it, if Shalem is a name for Jerusalem (*yᵉrûšālayim*) (cf. Ps 76:2). Admittedly, elsewhere in the First Testament Jerusalem is the home of the Yebusites (until David captures it), and its name is Yebus (2 Chron 3:1 also identifies Moriah in Gen 22 with Jerusalem). The name Malki-ṣedeq means Faithfulness-is- my-king or My-king-is-faithfulness, faithfulness being a name or attribute of the deity whom Melchizedek serves. The name compares with that of Adonizedek (My-lord-is-faithfulness) and of Zedekiah (Yahu-is-my-faithfulness). Genesis goes on to call Melchizedek’s deity “God On High” (*’ēl ‘elyôn*), implicitly a designation for Yahweh in Ps 78:35; the simple “On High” is such a designation elsewhere (e.g., Ps 73:11). But *’ēl* is also the Canaanites’ designation for the supreme deity, and “God On High” is a way of describing the most senior deity in the traditional religion of Canaan. Melchizedek was not only king but priest (as presumably was the king of Sodom, though he brings no gifts or greeting). Bread and water would be welcome refreshment; bread and wine would make the event special.[[170]](#footnote-170)

In his capacity as priest as well as king, Melchizedek pronounces blessings (v. 19a). The First Testament generally suggests the principle of the separation of power in the world of worship and power in the world of economics and politics. There are kings or governors and there are priests, not to say prophets. Melchizedek is both king and priest, which is risky, but is working okay at that moment. The Davidic king inherits his position (Ps 110), which is risky and sometimes does not work well. Elsewhere in Genesis, pronouncing blessings is the privilege and responsibility of the family and in particular of the father of the family (e.g., 24:60; 28:1; 31:55 [32:1]; 49:28); it is an aspect of the quasi-priestly role of the father, who also leads the family in worship. Priestly blessing comes in when there are priests (Num 6:23-27). Other (settled) peoples, however, already have priests who lead worship and bless people. They are the channels through whom people reach out to God and God reaches out to people. They ensure that there is real contact and communication between people and God and between God and people. They also protect people from the inherently overwhelming aspect of contact with God, and from the accidentally overwhelming aspect of that contact when there is something about you beyond your regular humanness that clashes too much with who God is.

Melchizedek blesses Abraham by praying that God may bless him (v. 19b), presumably because of the action he has undertaken in rescuing the women and the rest of the company and the property of the five kings (who are also Melchizedek’s allies?). He blesses Abraham in the name of God On High who is “generator [*qōnēh*] of heavens and earth”—a description that would go naturally with his being “God On High.” The usual First Testament expression is “maker of heavens and earth” (Ps 115:15; 121:2; 124:8; 134:3; 146:6). In Hebrew *qōnēh* would most often suggest acquirer or owner (e.g., Isa 1:3; 24:2; Vg has “owner” in v. 22). But among the Canaanites the word refers to God as the creator (LXX and Vg have “who created”).[[171]](#footnote-171)

Melchizedek goes on (v. 20) to bless God. There was reason to bless Abraham—he took the decisive action that rescued the women and the company. There was also reason to bless God: he gave Abraham the victory. He had “unshielded” Abraham’s victims—made it impossible for them to defend themselves; the rare verb comes from the common word for a shield (*māgēn*).One might have expected the verb to mean “shield” but it is closer to meaning “unshield” here and in Hos 11:8 (the other occurrence is Prov 4:9). The significance of using this word will become clearer in 15:2. While the story did not refer to God giving Abraham the victory, Melchizedek knows where such victories come from. Presumably it is Abraham who gives Melchizedek a tenth of everything—in other words, he gives him a tithe (Hebrew has the one word *ma‘ăśēr*, but English separated out the two meanings). Although the notion of tithing is well-known in the First Testament (e.g., 28:22; Deut 14:22; 26:12; Neh 10:37-38 [38-39]), there is no exact parallel for this one-time tithe; Num 31:25-41 and 1 Sam 8:15, 17 are partial parallels.[[172]](#footnote-172) By giving one day a week to God and doing nothing on that day, in recognition that the whole week is a gift from God, one frees up the other six days; likewise by giving one possession in ten to God and doing nothing with it, in recognition that everything is a gift from God, one frees up the other nine-tenths.

In the Qumran scroll 11QMelchizedek (11Q13), Melchizedek has become a supernatural being with a role in the final judgment.[[173]](#footnote-173) Hebrews 5—7 sees Jesus as having inherited Melchizedek’s position as priest in a way that is quite logical if he is the heir of David and the Messiah. It wouldn’t be surprising if the readers of Hebrews knew ideas like the ones that appear in 11QMelchizedek (Heb 1 suggests they were interested in angels) and if Hebrews was offering them a preferable way of thinking about Melchizedek in relation to Jesus, but Hebrews contains no direct pointers to this possibility. It is more interested in the possibility that emerges from the Melchizedek story of establishing the Messiah’s (and thus Jesus’s) position as a priest even though he is not from clan of Levi. Indeed, being a priest like Melchizedek is better than being a Levitical priest (see esp. Heb 7)! But in an odd way, the strangely isolated position and person of Melchizedek suggests links with the unique position and person of Jesus. So Hebrews says, “Let Gen 14 help you understand something of the significance of Jesus.”[[174]](#footnote-174) Melchizedek does manage to combine power in politics and power in worship. He is the giver of blessing to people and to God. He brings not merely bread and water but bread and wine, not merely the staple that we need but something extra that we don’t need. Subsequent to New Testament times, Melchizedek’s bread and wine had to make Christians think of the Eucharist.[[175]](#footnote-175)

**14:21-24.** So what’s to happen to the other nine-tenths? The king of Sodom has an answer that expresses his gratitude.

Abraham doesn’t like his answer (v. 22). His reasoning is implicit in his preamble. When someone says something solemnly or when swears that something is true, they raise their hand towards God, as they do when they pray (e.g., Deut 32:40). They are drawing God’s attention to what they are saying and inviting God to take action if they are lying or if they don’t mean what they say or if they fail to do what they say. And the God to whom Abraham thus appeals is God On High, generator of heavens and earth, God as Melchizedek spoke of him. Here as elsewhere Genesis assumes the validity of the religion of other peoples.[[176]](#footnote-176) Yet Abraham prefaces that description of God with the name Yahweh. Like other references to Yahweh in Genesis, putting the name “Yahweh” on Abraham’s lips is technically an anachronism. Yahweh had not yet invited his people to call him by that name. But it was indeed Yahweh who had been acting in enabling Abraham to rescue Lot, so the anachronism is a technicality. The affirmation of substance in the words put on Abraham’s lips is that, while Abraham could properly recognize that Melchizedek serves the real God, in order to have a fuller picture of the real God one needs to see this God as the one involved in the story of Abraham and his descendants who live their life in the context of God’s promise to them.

The substance of Abraham’s solemn declaration to the king (v. 23), is that he doesn’t want the plunder. Melchizedek’s blessing of God and Abraham’s giving Melchizedek a tithe have recognized that God was the one who made Abraham’s victory possible. Accepting the plunder would let the king of Sodom be the one who made Abraham rich. Actually it is God who does so. Abraham rejects zero-sum thinking.[[177]](#footnote-177) And we know that there is reason to be wary when you are eating with the king of a place like Sodom, whose proposal provokes a more negative reaction than the one Abraham has to Pharaoh.

There is that other reason for taking plunder (v. 24). Going on military expeditions is a costly business, and the plunder offsets expenses. Abraham’s staff had to take their supplies, so they should put in their expense claims. And Abraham’s three allies (and no doubt their staff) should have their share.

## Big Powers and Little Powers

How do the people of God relate to the world scene? They should not forget that the life of the nations continues to develop within the broad context of God’s blessing, though they should also keep in mind that big powers enjoy being big powers and extending their empires, because they like power and because they can thus enrich themselves. Conversely, little powers don’t much like being under the control of big powers, because it tends to cost them in taxes and because they also like being in control of their own destiny. But they may need to choose their moment to assert their independence. In the context of the history of Ephraim and Judah it could suggest the moral that the underlings of an empire need to think twice before rebelling against the empire.

The people of God sometimes find themselves caught up in the assertive actions of big powers and the resistance of little powers. Does Abraham then set an example?[[178]](#footnote-178) One might compare him with Moses when he strikes down an Egyptian who is beating an Israelite.[[179]](#footnote-179) But the people of God or other entities then need not merely to choose their moment wisely but to take into account the obligations placed upon them by their relationships within the people of God as a whole. Making war is more likely to be the morally right course if we are acting in faithfulness to the people of God or to other people who are the victims of wrongful treatment. And we may not refuse to act just because it was their own fault that the victims got into a mess. On the other hand, if we succeed, liberators do not enrich themselves through their exploits, especially at the expense of those they liberate. Abraham anticipates the stance of Gideon.[[180]](#footnote-180) Declining the plunder from the expedition suggests he is prepared to be in the world but he will not be sucked into being of it.

Successfully doing the right thing in a political or military context may require both our commitment and God’s involvement. Gen 14 itself does not refer to God’s involvement. The rescue comes about because Abraham acts. But “Melchizedek confesses their God as both creator and redeemer… in a way that Abraham had not…. Melchizedek is represented as Abraham’s teacher regarding the activity of their common deity.”[[181]](#footnote-181) Whereas Lot the insider becomes an outsider, Melchizedek the outsider speaks like an insider. While insiders can become a threat or a problem, outsiders can become a blessing.[[182]](#footnote-182) Melchizedek recognizes that God is both “generator of heavens and earth” and one who “has delivered your attackers into your hand.” LXX, Vg have “who created heavens and earth,” but Melchizedek’s formula uses a participle, which is more open to pointing to God’s ongoing activity. The five psalm references to Yahweh’s being maker of heavens and earth, noted above, have parallel implications. They associate Yahweh’s being maker of heavens and earth either with Yahweh blessing us or with Yahweh helping us.[[183]](#footnote-183) Genesis and the Psalms see God’s activity as creator as not relating only to the past; it has implications in the present.

# Genesis 15:1-20—”But Lord Yahweh…”

## Overview

Whereas the main focus in Gen 12—14 has been the land that Abraham’s offspring will possess, Gen 15—22 will focus more on the offspring themselves. Gen 15 marks the shift; “offspring” is a key word (see vv. 3, 5, 13, 18).[[184]](#footnote-184) Vv. 1-6 begins from the possessions that Yahweh promises Abraham; Abraham’s concern is who he will pass them onto. Yahweh affirms that he will have offspring, and Abraham responds with a commitment of trust. Vv. 7-21 reasserts Yahweh’s promise of the land and ends with his demonstration of commitment which includes his actual conveying of the gift of the land to Abraham’s non-existent offspring. In both connections, Gen 15 “is most centrally concerned with delay.”[[185]](#footnote-185)

## Translation

1Subsequently, Yahweh’s word came[[186]](#footnote-186) to Abram in a vision:

Don’t be afraid, Abram.

I will be your shield,

and your wages will be very big.[[187]](#footnote-187)

BBut Abram said, “Lord[[188]](#footnote-188) Yahweh, what will you give me, when I’m going to depart childless, and the heir[[189]](#footnote-189) to my household is Dammešeq, Eli‘ezer?” 3So Abram said, “There, you haven’t given me offspring. And there, someone from my household will come into possession from me.”[[190]](#footnote-190) 4But there, Yahweh’s word came to him: “This man won’t come into possession from you. No, only someone who comes from your insides – he’ll come into possession from you.” 5He took him outside and said, “Look at the heavens, please, and count the stars, if you can count them.” He said to him, “That’s what your offspring will be like.” 6And in that he trusted in Yahweh,[[191]](#footnote-191) he deemed it[[192]](#footnote-192) as faithfulness on his part.

7He said to him, “I am Yahweh who[[193]](#footnote-193) got you out from Ur of the Kaśdites to give you this country as a possession.” 8But he said, “Lord Yahweh, how may I know that I will come into possession of it?” 9He said to him, “Get me a three-year-old heifer,[[194]](#footnote-194) a three-year-old goat, a three-year-old ram, a pigeon, and a baby bird.” 10He got him all these, cut them in half, and put one half opposite its neighbor, but he didn’t cut the bird in half. 11The screecher came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away. 12As the sun was about to go, a coma fell on Abram, and there, a great dark dread was falling on him.

13He said to Abram, “You can know for sure[[195]](#footnote-195) that your offspring will be resident aliens in a country not theirs, and they will serve them and they will humble them,[[196]](#footnote-196) for 400 years. 14But the nation that they serve I’m indeed going to judge. After this they will get out with much property.

15And you: you will go to your forebears with things being well;

you’ll be buried in a good old age.

16In the fourth generation they will come back here,

because the Amorite’s waywardness is not complete heretofore.

17The sun went and there was deep darkness, and there, a smoking oven, a blazing torch, that passed between those pieces. 18On that day Yahweh solemnized a pact with Abram, saying “To your offspring I am giving[[197]](#footnote-197) this country, from the Miṣrayim river[[198]](#footnote-198) to the big river (the River Perat): 19the Qenite, the Qenizzite, the Qadmonite, 20the Ḥittite, the Perizzite, the Repha’ites, 21the Amorite, the Kena‘anite, the Girgašite,[[199]](#footnote-199) and the Yebusite.”

## Interpretation

MT has only a paragraph break, not a unit break, at the end of Gen 14; indeed, it treats Gen 14—17 as one unit. And the opening of Gen 15 does link back to Gen 14, with which Gen 15 has a series of verbal links (see the comments on vv. 1-2, 14-18). But Gen 15 moves from a primary focus on the promise of land to include more focus on the promise of offspring, and the medieval chapter division generates a plausible understanding of the unit it devises. The dominant features of the two unequal parts of the chapter are a double dialogue. Twice Yahweh reaffirms his promises to Abraham, twice Abraham voices unease, and twice Yahweh responds with more reaffirmation.[[200]](#footnote-200) A key question underlying the dialogue is, “what are the nature and basis of a relationship with Yahweh?” And following the two sequences of dialogue there comes the twofold answer. The relationship is one of trust that Yahweh himself is faithful in the relationships and the commitments he enters into, a belief based on the pact he has made and has given evidence of.

1. Yahweh identifies himself and makes promises

(partly in a poetic line)

2-3 Abraham responds with a “but”

4-5 Yahweh makes promises and gives him something extraordinary to look at

6 The narrator reports Abraham’s trust in Yahweh

7 Yahweh identifies himself and makes promises

8 Abraham responds with a “but”

9-17 Yahweh makes promises and gives him something extraordinary to look at

(partly in two poetic lines)

18-21 The narrator reports Yahweh’s making of a pact with Abraham

There is not so much action in this story; the chapter is closer to being simply a dialogue.[[201]](#footnote-201) The questioning in v. 8 which might seem strange after v. 6, the self-announcement by Yahweh in v. 7 despite his having presented himself in v. 2, and the impression in vv. 12-17 that evening is falling whereas it was already dark in v. 5,[[202]](#footnote-202) reflect the rhetorical rather than linear unfolding of the chapter. The chapter looks at the same question twice and comprises two complementary reflections on it.[[203]](#footnote-203)

**15:1-2.** The opening words (literally, “after these things”) do not usually imply any logical connection between two events (e.g., 40:1) though they can invite the audience to wonder whether there is a connection (e.g., 22:1). Here a link will soon become clear. Gen 13:5-18 related how a defining or crossroads moment in Abraham’s story led into a promise from Yahweh. That sequence now recurs. The sequence also overlaps with 12:1-8, where a word from Yahweh set the series of events going, Abraham went on the challenging journey that Yahweh commissioned, and then Yahweh appeared to him; it contrasts with the sequence that followed in 12:9—13:4, where there was another defining moment and a decisive response by Abraham, and a divine response that came in actions rather than in words or visions. The word for vision here (*maḥăzeh*) otherwise appears in the Torah only in Num 24:4, 16, at the other end of the story in Genesis to Numbers, when Yahweh renews the promise of blessing for Israel at the end of its wilderness journey (Ezek 13:7 is its sole other occurrence in the First Testament). While Genesis makes other references to Yahweh “appearing” (*rā’āh* niphal; e.g., 17:1; 18:1), the Torah does not use the verb *ḥāzāh*, and in Hebrew as in English, words for “vision” hint at something more out-of-the-ordinary than words for “appearing” (that is, while *ḥāzāh* can be used for ordinary seeing, *rā’āh* is the more usual word in that connection). And something out-of-the-ordinary is indeed to follow. On the other hand, a “vision” may suggest something inside Abraham’s head (though real), whereas “appearing” may suggest something externalized (cf. 18:1). In general, talk of visions and of that other kind of appearing/seeing fits what prophets speak of, which coheres with the fact that here there is a “word” to follow, and then something to see—something amazing but “natural” in v. 5 and something extraordinary and fantastic in vv. 9-17. Further, elsewhere the expression “Yahweh’s word came to…” introduces Yahweh’s words to a prophet (e.g., 1 Sam 15:10; 1 Kings 17:2; Jer 1:4; Ezek 1:2), so that it provides a neat anticipation of the later description of Abraham as a prophet (20:7).[[204]](#footnote-204) One way or another, “this is not ‘just another’ divine word.”[[205]](#footnote-205)

The exhortation “Don’t be afraid” (v. 1b) comes in two sorts of connection in the First Testament. It comes in connection with Yahweh’s appearing, an experience to which fear is an appropriate reaction because of the danger of being in the high-voltage presence of God (e.g., Exod 20:20 [17]). More often it appears in contexts where there is more down-to-earth reason for being afraid (e.g., 21:17; 26:24; 35:17; 43:23; 46:3; 50:19, 21). Here, what follows suggests this more usual significance. In other Middle Eastern texts, it comes in messages of encouragement to a king (cf. Isa 7:4; 37:6), but in the First Testament, at least, the usage is more general. Isa 41:10-13 addresses Israel as “Abraham’s offspring” and urges it, “Don’t be afraid” (*GenR* 44.3). Melchizedek has pointed out that God “unshielded” Abraham’s opponents (14:20), and God now declares that the reason for not being afraid is that God is and will be Abraham’s “shield.” The second and third cola of Yahweh’s words are noun clauses (literally, “I your shield, and your wages very big”). The declaration about being a shield will apply in the present and the future (cf. e.g., Ps 18:2, 30 [3, 31]; 28:7; 33:20), though the declaration about the wages is more future-oriented. In substance though not in words, that declaration about wages also links back with 14:17-24. Abraham had declined to be profited by his venture. He could have simply assumed that Yahweh was giving him the plunder to keep, as he gave him the victory, but he didn’t. Yet arguably refusing to take plunder is not a practical way to live in the world and to commit yourself to doing what needs to be done or should be done. Abraham has a huge retinue to provide for. Yahweh affirms his assumption and promises that he will not only survive but thrive. He will be rewarded. God promises to make sure that his people get their wages. Jesus promises that people who for his sake have abandoned family and land (that is, their means of support) will receive them a hundred-fold in the present age. The significance of these promises is their implausibility. If they obviously corresponded to experience, they would hardly be needed. The faithful in Israel and the faithful followers of Jesus are challenged to live by them even when they don’t seem to come true. They are challenged not to be afraid (which is said to be the most common command in the Scriptures). The shielding promise is pretty important, too.

Abraham seems to be able to accept Yahweh’s promise (v. 2a); his worry lies elsewhere. Here comes the transition to the theme of offspring. The question is, to whom will he be able to pass on this reward? In the Middle East it may have been possible to adopt someone to inherit one’s estate and look after one’s affairs and obligations, and Abraham assumes he needs to do so, but he doesn’t like it. “Wages make a future possible, but a childless person has no future.”[[206]](#footnote-206) Here for the first time we get words from Abraham that address God—and they are questions that respond to God’s promises.[[207]](#footnote-207) And for the first time Yahweh is “Lord”. In Genesis this form of address comes only in Gen 15 and 18—20 (the combined address “Lord Yahweh” recurs in v. 8 and comes only here in Genesis-Numbers). It regularly suggests both deference and boldness. One might say “Lord” when recognizing that Yahweh is the sovereign God but when one is speaking in a way that could imply effrontery. What’s the point in talking about wages when one has no one to pass on the wealth to? The fact that Sarah cannot have children has sat uneasily at the side of the narrative since 11:30 but now Abraham puts it on the table. There is again some ambiguity in the portrayal of Abraham, though one could still say that “the sign that strengthens faith is not given to the unbeliever or to the doubter, but to the believer.”[[208]](#footnote-208) And his relationship with God suggests that deference and forthrightness go together in speaking to God (cf. Mark 14:35-36). One can be forthright if one is also prepared to submit to God as Lord; one can submit to God as Lord if one can also be forthright. “The Lord sometimes concedes to his children, that they may freely express any objection which comes into their mind.”[[209]](#footnote-209) The prayer relationship is a relationship with a Father, and in that relationship children are able to be plainspoken in the context of deference and to be deferent in the context of a freedom to be plainspoken. Trust and questioning interweave.

The meaning of Abraham’s further comment about Eli’ezer (v. 2b) is perplexing, but again one significance of the words is that they make links back with 14:14-24 through the references to Abraham’s household and to Damascus. Another possible link is the fact that Eliezer’s name translates numerically into the figure 318 (cf. 14:15; see e.g., *GenR* 44.9). The name recurs in the First Testament, but this Eliezer appears only here. It is odd that there is no mention of Lot, the nephew who came from Harran as a member of Abraham’s household; maybe Abraham simply takes for granted that he has eliminated himself from consideration.[[210]](#footnote-210)

**15:3-6.** Fortunately Abraham goes on to express his point more straightforwardly, though also more confrontationally. Notwithstanding the “Lord Yahweh” salutation, He is indeed quite confident about being forthright in what he says to God. Yahweh has been talking about giving him his wages, but there is a more important giving that Abraham is concerned about, and Yahweh has not given the one thing Abraham really wants. The person from his household who will look after things for him after he dies will be someone who belongs to his wider entourage, but his own offspring will not be the one who becomes the owner of all that he possesses.

The straight talking pays off (v. 4) and the promise from 12:2-3, 7; 13:15-16 becomes more explicit. Yahweh sets “your insides” against “my household,”[[211]](#footnote-211) leaving himself very little wiggle room. The promise compares with God’s later promise to David (2 Sam 7:12) and thus anticipatorily implies that it belongs to Abraham’s offspring as a whole not just the king.[[212]](#footnote-212) Yet Jesus doesn’t reiterate and generalize this promise as he reiterates and generalizes the one about wages, even though sadness at not being able to pass on the family business is not confined to traditional societies but is quite cross-cultural, like sadness about never having had children. He does reiterate the promise of fruitfulness (e.g., Mark 4). There are other forms of fecundity, of “capacity to touch hearts and to give life.”[[213]](#footnote-213)

Unnecessarily and unprompted, Yahweh goes on to make the promise more spectacular (v. 5). Yahweh again says “please” in connection with making an outrageous undertaking, as he did in connection with the promise of land and people in 13:14-17. He again invites Abraham to look—not this time at the land but at the night sky; visions commonly come at night (unless this bidding gains force from it being daytime!).[[214]](#footnote-214) The simile he suggests is again ridiculous (count the dirt, count the stars?).

Abraham’s immediate reaction is therefore significant (v. 6). Another key verb makes its first appearance, “trust” (*’āman* hiphil). The First Testament speaks often of *not* trusting (e.g., Deut 1:32; 9:23; 2 Kings 17:14; Ps 78:22), which highlights he remarkable nature of Abraham’s reaction. While the verb can suggest mental assent to some words, it more characteristically denotes that one is placing one’s entire reliance on someone else, entrusting oneself to this person. The syntax suggests that this trust is not something that Abraham now shows for the first time but an attitude that has already characterized him, as one can see (e.g., in 12:1-8). So the comment makes something explicit that has been implicit already. The logic and the grammar then suggest that the one who does the trusting is also the one who does the deeming. As an expression of his trust, Abraham concludes that he can believe that Yahweh will be faithful to him and to his promise. Yahweh will show *ṣᵉdāqāh*; he will do the right thing by Abraham. Gen 6:9 has commented on Noah’s *ṣᵉdāqāh* as someone who lived in the right way in his relationship with God and with the other people in his family and community. In this respect Noah was God-like. Actually, Yahweh is the original one who lives rightly in his relationship with people. An aspect of Abraham’s trust is that he is prepared to see Yahweh as having that characteristic and to expect that it will be expressed in his faithfulness to his promise. “The only difference between us and Abraham is this, that Abraham believed the promises.”[[215]](#footnote-215)

LXX translates v. 6 “it was reckoned to him as *dikaiosunē*”; the agent of the deeming is then Yahweh.[[216]](#footnote-216) When LXX’s translation is reflected in Rom 4:3, 22; Gal 3:6; James 2:23, this assumption applies. God is counting Abraham as someone who is *dikaios*. There were believers in Jesus who insisted that observances such as circumcision and other requirements from the Torah must be added to trust in Jesus if people are to count as *dikaioi.* Paul appeals to Abraham’s story to show that it cannot be so; Yahweh treated Abraham as *dikaios* on the basis of his trust in his promise. With the irony that often obtains in connection with New Testament references to the First Testament, Paul’s quotation takes these particular scriptural words in a way that is not inherent to them, but his point is a good First Testament one. The Genesis reference to Abraham’s trust is a comment on the stance he had taken to Yahweh in response to his promise and commission from the beginning, and (Paul accurately notes) the requirement of circumcision has not been made yet. James can make an opposite point on the basis of this same comment on Abraham’s trust, with the same irony. James perhaps needs to deal with people who think that all you have to do is believe and thus that there is no need for observances such as baptism or for sacrificial generosity to needy believers. And he can note that the later requirement of circumcision is a fulfillment of the requirement of trust—a filling out of this expectation.[[217]](#footnote-217)

For readers over the past thousand years or so, there is a further double complication about understanding Gen 15:6 and the New Testament’s references to it. For Genesis, the question at issue is *ṣᵉdāqāh*—Yahweh’s *ṣᵉdāqāh* (in MT) and/or Abraham’s *ṣᵉdāqāh* (in LXX and the New Testament). But LXX has translated *ṣᵉdāqāh* with the word *dikaiosunē*, which is then routinely translated into English as “righteousness.” And Paul and James have added the word *dikaiōsis* which becomes “justification.” Since the medieval period, in particular, Christian theology has then commonly understood the New Testament to be picturing the relationship between God and his people in quasi-legal terms. This understanding contrasts with that in Genesis and in Paul or James. Someone who is *ṣaddîq* is someone who is in a right relationship with God and with other people—someone who does the right thing by God and by other people. And God’s *ṣᵉdāqāh* or *dikaiosunē* is that faithfulness whereby God does the right thing in relation to Abraham and his offspring and thus stays in right relationship with them. MT’s implication is that the calling of the people of God is to follow Abraham by trusting in that *ṣᵉdāqāh*. LXX’s point and Paul’s point is that as they do so, God looks on them as people who are *ṣaddîqîm*; they are right with him. And James’s point is that this trust will also find expression in doing the right thing.

**15:7-12.** Forthefirst time in the First Testament Yahweh declares “I [am] Yahweh.” In a polytheistic context such a self-introduction might be necessary to indicate who speaks. Here it is the kind of self-introduction that reminds the addressees that they have to take the speaker seriously. But in this instance as in some others, the significance and force of the self-introduction is increased by the description that follows: compare 28:13, but also and especially Exod 20:2, where Yahweh uses the same verb as here (“got you out from”) with regard to getting Israel out of Egypt, that “household of serfs” (cf. v. 13 here). Yahweh goes on to reaffirm the other promise, about the land, picking up 11:28, 31; 12:1. It is the first time Genesis has said that Yahweh got Abraham out from Ur (making explicit something implicit in 12:1?), and the formulation would remind the audience of another way in which his dealings with Abraham anticipated his dealings with Israel in getting them out of Egypt. Yahweh goes on to pick up Abraham’s “possession” language, not in connection with who will inherit from Abraham, but with regard to the secure tenure that Yahweh will give Abraham.

Once again Abraham addresses God as Lord Yahweh (v. 8) and signals to him and to the audience that he is about the say something submissive but bold. If we read the chapter linearly, the implication is that his trusting Yahweh over offspring does not carry over into immediately trusting Yahweh over the land. Please can he have some grounds for believing Yahweh’s promise?

Yes, he can (vv. 9-10). Whereas one might have expected Yahweh to decline or to issue a rebuke, we may again compare Abraham and Moses, and Yahweh’s dealing with them: Moses gets away with questioning Yahweh three times before getting scolded for the fourth (see Exod 3—4). Although Yahweh’s giving a sign fits his action on other occasions, there would be no basis for predicting how Yahweh will go about convincing Abraham on this occasion. He is first to assemble nine animals and two birds, which would be an expensive collection and gives another pointer to the size of Abraham’s “household.” We don’t know why the rite involves these particular creatures; they would all count as clean but they don’t correspond to lists of creatures for sacrifice and Abraham does not treat them in the manner of a sacrifice—there will be no spattering of blood or offering or burning[[218]](#footnote-218) (in *Jub* 14 Abraham builds an altar, pours out their blood on it, and offers them up). Whereas sometimes the First Testament likes to relate how Yahweh gives instructions that are then fulfilled, here the narrator skips the instructions to move briskly on to what Abraham does. Perhaps the reason the birds were not cut in half (cf. Lev 1:17) was that they were so small; they were perhaps laid opposite each other.

Not surprisingly, scavenger birds think they have found their dinner (v. 11). The birds recall the half-bird, half-human “snatchers” (“harpies”) of Greek and Roman mythology.[[219]](#footnote-219) In the context of Genesis, they recall the fearsome sphinxes of Gen 3:24, if they combined birds’ wings with animal and/or human features. Later references to the screechers (Isa 18:6; 46:11; Jer 12:9; Ezek 39:4) suggest that they might make the audience think of peoples that would attack Abraham’s offspring and Yahweh’s purpose for them (cf. TgNeoph, TgPsJ), and vv. 12-20 may support that understanding. Whereas the report had proceeded with haste in omitting the instructions for what Abraham was to do, the account of the scavengers adds to the suspense as we continue to wait for the response to Abraham’s question and for the event that has been heralded, though it also anticipates the promise if the scavengers suggest the peoples who will be referred and named to in vv. 13, 16, and 19-21.

A moment comes (v. 12) when Abraham would be incapable of driving them away because he was overcome by a coma and by darkness. The description of the great dark dread prepares the audience for the fact that Yahweh is about to appear, and the narrative’s “there” invites us to watch the scene (the dynamic will recur in v. 17).

**15:13-16.** You want to “know”? You will definitely know. The chapter continues to raise suspense by holding back the description of Yahweh’s appearing while it first repeats the promise recalled by v. 7. As is commonly the case, in doing so Yahweh elaborates the promise, but in doing so raises suspense further by portraying “the dark stretch of history which is to be experienced by Abraham’s descendants before the promise is fulfilled.”[[220]](#footnote-220) The audience knows the identity of the unnamed country where Abraham’s offspring will be resident as aliens (*gēr*). Maybe Abraham himself could work it out because he has been that way before (12:10). At this time he is a resident alien in a country that is not his (23:4; 35:27). But this other residency will be different: whereas in Canaan there is no central government that can oppress aliens, so that they just have to stay the right side of the people in a particular area (e.g., 20:1; 21:23, 34), in Egypt there is a central government and they will find themselves in the position of state serfs. It will humble them (*‘ānāh* piel)—treat them as people with no rights, and worse (see Exod 1:11-12). Their 400-year stay there is approximately equivalent to the 430 years of Exod 12:40-41. If the audience wonders why it took so long for Israel to gain possession of Canaan, Genesis is providing an answer. And if it is wondering about Yahweh’s fulfillment of promises that apply to it, Yahweh’s words imply pointers towards an answer.

One aspect of the answer is that the years through which Israel’s ancestors are stuck in Egypt will not last forever (v. 14). The job of a judge is to see that deliverance comes to people who are treated as if they have no rights (e.g., Jer 5:28; 22:16), and Yahweh will act as judge (*dîn*) so that Abraham’s offspring do get out of the country where they have no rights. The First Testament would usually use the verb *šāpaṭ* in speaking of such judgment (e.g., 16:5; 18:25), but here Yahweh uses the verb *dîn* in its participial form *dān* whichgenerates a link with the reference to Dan (also *dān*) in 14:14.There follows another link with what has preceded. The people will come out with much “property”—the not-very-common word which recurred in the previous chapter (14:11, 12, 16, 21; see also 12:5; 13:6). More explicitly than happened in v. 1, Yahweh brings out into the open the question whether Abraham (and his offspring) can survive by living in the unworldly way that Abraham adopted in refusing to keep Sodom’s property. They will do more than survive. Their being resident aliens at best, state serfs and people with no rights at worst, will not mean that they have lost forever the relative prosperity that the family knew when they came from Harran and when they settled near Beth El and near Mamre after Abraham’s own Egyptian adventure.

Yahweh sums up his promise in two bicola (vv. 15-16). The first relates to Abraham himself. He will not see these events that are centuries away, but he can relax and know that they are going to come about. In the parallel cola, first Yahweh speaks not neutrally or solemnly about Abraham “departing” (as Abraham did in v. 2) or about his “dying,” but positively or encouragingly about his joining his ancestors. It’s a slightly audacious way to speak of death, because while Abraham and Sarah’s descendants will join them in the tomb that Abraham will acquire in Mamre (Gen 23), Abraham and Sarah will not join their ancestors who were buried hundreds of miles away. Perhaps the assumption is that in Sheol they will join them. However, the stress lies on the expression that follows. Abraham will pass away *bᵉšālôm*: not merely “in peace” but with things going well for the rest of his life until the end, which they pretty much do (cf. the promise to Hezekiah, Isa 39:8). The word *šālôm* makes a link with the reference to Melchizedek as king of *šālēm* in 14:18. Abraham will come to the grave in a good old age (175, which one might see as equivalent to 80 or 90 in our terms), like a shock of grain going up to the threshing floor at its season (Job 5:26).[[221]](#footnote-221) Gen 25:7-10 relate the fulfillment of the promise when Abraham is buried by his two oldest sons and joins Sarah.

It is not quite so clear that the companion summary promise about Abraham’s offspring (v. 16) is a poetic line; it scans as 4-5 in MT and the cola are complementary but they show parallelism only in the closing word in each. But I will give it the benefit of the doubt, and taking it as poetic may provide support for understanding four generations as a figurative expression for four lifetimes and thus four centuries (cf. v. 13)—though alternatively the four generations might stretch from Levi to Moses (via Kohat and Amram).[[222]](#footnote-222) The second colon notes that Yahweh’s fulfillment of his promises to Abraham has to work along with being fair in his treatment of the people in country at the moment; in this context “Amorites” is a general term for the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the land, as “Canaanites” often is. But the allusion to them as Amorite takes up the references to the Amorite in 14:7 and 13. Yahweh cannot simply throw out the current inhabitants of the country in favor of Abraham’s offspring whom he wishes to favor, even for the sake of his own purpose for the world as a whole. The Amorites must and will have lots of time to turn from their waywardness before Yahweh will be able to say, “That’s it.” In a parallelism between the two lines of Yahweh’s promise, the allusion to Amorite waywardness being “complete” (*šālēm*) pairs with the allusion to “things being well” for Abraham (*šālôm*), as well as linking with the reference to the town of *šālēm* in 14:18. Lev 18:24-28 will specify (in the context of Lev 18 as a whole) that the waywardness of the country’s pre-Israelite inhabitants[[223]](#footnote-223) may lie in the way they conduct their marital, family, and sexual lives, which defile the country and will make it vomit them out, as it will do to Abraham’s descendants if they live the same way.

**15:17-20. To** Abraham’s question “how may I know,” Yahweh’s response so far has again been simply been to restate the promise in ultra-high definition rainbow colors, thereby simply raising suspense. As it gets dark there comes the sign for which vv. 9-12 made the preparations. The preparations presuppose that the making of a commitment between two parties can involve the tearing apart of an animal which implies an enacted prayer: if I do not keep my commitment to this pact, may I be torn apart like this animal (see Jer 34:18-19). Middle Eastern treaties refer to such rites and prayers.[[224]](#footnote-224) In an eighth-century inscription from Sefire near Aleppo, for instance, Matti’el the king of Arpad declares, “[As] this calf is cut up, thus Matti’el and his nobles will be cut up.”[[225]](#footnote-225) Here the smoking oven which can also be described as a blazing torch represents Yahweh himself, though Genesis does not quite say that Yahweh *is* the oven or the torch. It might convey to Abraham the message, “keep well away, this is dangerous.” While the description might make the audience think of the fire and cloud pillar at the exodus or the fiery and cloudy appearing of Yahweh at Sinai, the wording is distinctive to this passage. “All this is mystifying and is surely meant to be so.”[[226]](#footnote-226) But Yahweh is submitting himself to a familiar human ceremony. His passing between the parts of the animals is his enacted prayer that he may be torn apart like them if he does not keep his promise. “It is an extraordinary summit in the narrative,”[[227]](#footnote-227) the most profound self-humbling of God in the First Testament.[[228]](#footnote-228) No wonder Abraham trusted in Yahweh and deemed it as faithfulness on his part.

Thus (the narrator comments) Yahweh “solemnized a pact with Abraham” (v. 18). Abraham has a pact with Mamre, Eshkol, and Aner (14:13); Yahweh now offers him a different one. Literally, Yahweh “cut” the pact; one can see why this is a regular expression for the formal making of a “pact” or covenant.[[229]](#footnote-229) Like Yahweh’s pact with Noah, it is made “with” Abraham, despite the fact that Abraham is not required to do anything to make the pact work. Saying that Yahweh solemnized a pact *for* Abraham would be more logical; only Yahweh walked between the pieces of the creatures and enacted the self-curse. Yahweh goes on to summarize once more both aspects of the promise as he speaks of giving the *country* to Abraham’s *offspring*. They are two aspects of one commitment. The reprise again adds yet more high definition. First, the outward bounds of the land will extend hyperbolically from the Nile to the Euphrates.[[230]](#footnote-230) The expression “the Egyptian River” comes only here; the usual word for the Nile is *hayyᵉ’ōr* (cf. 41:1-2) but its eastern branch is apparently *haššîḥôr*, which can be seen as the edge of the promised land(Josh 13:3; 1 Chron 13:5). In the terms of literal geography, the southern boundary will be the Egyptian Wadi (that is, Wadi El-Arish, just south of the modern border between Gaza and Egypt), as in passages such as Num 34:5; Josh 15:4; 1 Kings 8:65. While the First Testament never pictures Egypt as an actual part of the short-lived Israelite empire, it does so picture land as far as the Euphrates—that is, including Syria (see 1 Kings 4:21-25 [5:1-5]; 1 Chron 18:3; cf. Deut 1:7; Josh 1:4). But perhaps the expression in v. 17 denotes the land between that of Mesopotamia and that of Egypt.

Internally (vv. 18-20), it will mean taking over the land of ten peoples; the list is the first and most comprehensive of the many such lists in the First Testament. The Qenites lived south of Judah and were the group to whom Moses’s father-in-law belonged (Judg 1:16); the Qenizzites lived in southern Judah to judge from Num 32:12; the Qadmonites appear only here but their name suggests they are easterners. Genesis has already mentioned the Hittites (10:15), Perizzites (13:7), Repa’ites (14:5), Amorites (10:16), Canaanites (9:18), Girgashites (10:16, and Yebusites (10:16). These peoples nowhere near comprised all the peoples of the area from Egypt to the Euphrates; 1 Kings 4:21-25 [5:1-5] implies a distinction between that larger area that Solomon ruled and the smaller area within it (which had once been the territory of these peoples) where the Israelites themselves actually lived.

## The Promise of Land

God makes an age-long pact with Abraham’s offspring, that they will enjoy his blessing, that they will be fruitful, that he will be God for them, and that they will possess the land of Canaan. The First Testament assumes throughout that these promises hold, even though they are often belied by events. The promise to give the land of Canaan to Abraham’s offspring first surfaced in 12:7, became a promise in perpetuity in 13:15, in 15:18-20 explicitly comes to designate the land currently occupied by ten peoples, but also in 15:16 has a significant rider attached to it. While God can do what he likes with the world (see Amos 9:7; Rom 9:17-18), he also recognizes a commitment to act in a fair way with people. In this connection Gen 15:16 is “one of the pivotal sayings of the Old Testament.”[[231]](#footnote-231) God does not commission Israel to charge into Canaan just because he wants to throw the Canaanites out. Nor does Israel simply make up the idea that God has commissioned them to charge into Canaan—or if they do, they recognize that their action needs a moral rationale, and if the rationale is phony, their argument collapses.

In Gen 15:16 God also recognizes a commitment to act in a long-tempered way. Gen 15 offers one clue to the reasons why God’s promises do not find fulfillment, at least for a long time. God effects his purpose not unilaterally but in interaction with nations and individuals, modifying or rescheduling his intentions in light of how human beings act. Second Peter 3 sees this commitment as lying behind the delay in Jesus’s appearing.

The comment about waywardness in 15:16 would raise tricky questions for Israel itself. Was the promise of the land to Abraham’s offspring implicitly conditional, so that Abraham’s descendants could be deemed to have forfeited it by their waywardness? They do get thrown out of the land in 721 and 587 on such a basis. Yet they come back to at least part of the land.

Further, Abraham’s offspring were destined to become a big people, and they did so; then through Jesus they became an exponentially bigger people. And this new version of Abraham’s people is not a nation and it does not have a land. So what has happened to the promise to give his people the land, and to do so “permanently” (*‘ad-‘ôlām*)? Did God change his mind without telling anyone? Do we read too much into the “permanently”? Can we qualify it without qualifying the idea that Yahweh is God and that he enfolds his people “permanently” (Pss 90:2; 103:17; 125:2)? But Isa 32:14, 17 has an interesting “permanently” followed by a limiting “until” which perhaps hints that Yahweh can or would qualify or change his “permanently” only in order to put something better in its place. Did he do so through Jesus?

Through Jesus God more-than fulfills the promise of blessing by means of the gift of the Holy Spirit and more-than fulfils the promise of fruitfulness through the giving of the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles. He threatens that the Jewish people may be cast off, but it seems to be a casting off only of the generation that declines to recognize Jesus. God’s commitment to the Jewish people still stands. That fact would imply that his promise regarding the land of Canaan still stands, because a relationship to the land is integral to the being of Israel. The New Testament does not give any indication that this promise concerning the land no longer applies, in the way that it indicates that rules about circumcision, and about cleanness and taboo no longer apply. Jesus confirms God’s commitment to the Jewish people rather than terminating it, and the land is an aspect of that commitment. Thus the Jewish people’s freedom since the late nineteenth century to return to the land has seemed to many Jewish and Christian people to be a process whereby God has been faithful to this promise. This view need not imply affirmation of the policies of the State of Israel. Nor need it imply sidestepping the implications of Gen 15:16.

The New Testament hardly implies that the gift of Jesus and of the Holy Spirit replaces the gift of the land. The notion of Israel as a distinctive people does not disappear, and that notion is hard to make sense of without its having the notion of a land attached. You need land in order to be a people and live. As long as there is still an Israel which is a definable people, God’s permanent promise of the land is surely part of God’s continuing commitment to it—though that consideration no more overrides questions about the rights of other people who have some claim on this land than was the case in Abraham’s day. Further, for the wider Israel which includes Gentiles who believe in Jesus, this land where Jesus lived, died, and rose could never lose its importance—as the phenomenon of pilgrimage suggests.

# Genesis 16:1-16—”But Saray…”

## Overview

For some chapters now, Genesis will focus more resolutely on the question of offspring for Abraham and Sarah. In Gen 16, in terms of plot:

1. (a) Whereas Gen 15 raised Abraham’s question about having offspring (“What will Yahweh do?”), Gen 16 raises Sarah’s question: “What are we to do?”
2. And she provides an answer: “Let’s see if Hagar can have a baby.”
3. (a) The trouble is that Hagar’s pregnancy divides the two women and leads to Hagar’s running away.

(b) But Yahweh’s envoy finds her and sends her back with a promise regarding her son, and this promising leads to Hagar’s naming God.

1. (a) The eventual outcome of Sarah’s proposal is thus “Yes, Hagar can have a baby,” and the problem is thus solved.
2. Except that the solution will turn out to be not God’s solution. See Gen 17.

The story thus involves Sarah, Abraham, Hagar, Yahweh’s envoy, Yahweh himself, and Ishmael, and it unfolds in six scenes, dominated by conversation:

1. Sarah and Abraham: the marriage relationship (vv. 1-4a)
2. Sarah and Hagar: the friction (vv. 4b-6)
3. Hagar and the envoy: the finding (vv. 7-9)
4. Hagar and the envoy: the promise (vv. 10-12)
5. Hagar and Yahweh: the naming (vv. 13-14)
6. Hagar and Ishmael: the birthing (vv. 15-16)

## Translation

1Now Śaray, Abram’s wife, had not given birth for him, but she had a Miṣrite maidservant; her name was Hagar. 2Śaray said to Abram, “Here, please: Yahweh has held me back from giving birth. Sleep with[[232]](#footnote-232) my maidservant, please; maybe I can build myself up[[233]](#footnote-233) through her.” Abram listened to Śaray’s voice, 3and Śaray, Abram’s wife, got Hagar the Miṣrite, her maidservant (at the end of ten years of Abram’s living in the country of Kena‘an), and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife for him. 4He slept with Hagar and she got pregnant.

4bShe saw that she was pregnant, and her mistress became diminished in her eyes. 5Śaray said to Abram, “The violation done to me is because of you. I myself put my maidservant in your arms, she’s seen that she’s pregnant, and I’ve become diminished in her eyes. Yahweh decide between me and you!” 6Abram said to Śaray, “Here, your maidservant is in your hand. Do to her what’s good in your eyes.” So Śaray humbled her, and she took flight from her.

7But Yahweh’s envoy found her near a certain water spring[[234]](#footnote-234) in the wilderness, near the spring on the Šur road. 8He said, “Hagar, maidservant of Śaray, where have you come from[[235]](#footnote-235) and where are you going?” She said, “From Śaray, my mistress – I’m taking flight.” 9Yahweh’s envoy said to her, “Go back to your mistress. Let yourself be humbled[[236]](#footnote-236) under her hand.”

10But Yahweh’s envoy said to her:

I will make your offspring really numerous,

it won’t be able to be counted up because of the number.”

11And Yahweh’s envoy said to her:

There, you’re pregnant

and you’re going to give birth[[237]](#footnote-237) to a son.

You’re to name him Yišma‘e’l,

because Yahweh has listened to your humbling.[[238]](#footnote-238)

12And he – he’ll be humanity’s wild donkey,[[239]](#footnote-239)

his hand against everyone,

Everyone’s hand against him,

and he’ll dwell in the face of all his brothers.

13She named[[240]](#footnote-240) Yahweh who spoke to her, “You are El ro’i,”[[241]](#footnote-241) because (she said), “Is it really here that I would have looked for[[242]](#footnote-242) the one who was looking at me?”[[243]](#footnote-243) 14That’s why people named the well “Ḥay Ro’i Well.”[[244]](#footnote-244) There, it’s between Qadeš and Bered.

15So Hagar gave birth to a son for Abram, and Abram named his son, to whom Hagar gave birth, Yišma‘e’l. 16Abram was a man of eighty-six years when Hagar gave birth to Yišma‘e’l for Abram.

## Interpretation

In MT, Gen 16 is a paragraph within Gen 14—17, like Gen 15. Following on Gen 15 one would expect Gen 16 to be a story about Abraham, and there are references to Abraham in the frame around the chapter and on the way along. The story’s question would then be whether Abraham is really going to a have a son (cf. v. 1a), and if so, how. And its answer is yes (vv. 15-16), but by a route that:

1. is surprising (vv. 1b-4a)
2. brings family conflict and suffering (vv. 4b-6)
3. necessitates a divine intervention to get things back on the rails (vv. 7-9)
4. heralds a promising yet surprising future for the boy (vv. 10-12)
5. issues in a revelation for his mother (vv. 13-14).

Whereas vv. 10-11 would make one think that Ishmael will indeed be the fulfillment of Yahweh’s promise to Abraham, v. 12 subverts that idea,[[245]](#footnote-245) and Gen 17 will deconstruct this story’s significance. This son is not the right one. “The dominant narrative tension throughout the story of Abraham” continues to be “one of delay.”[[246]](#footnote-246)

While one can thus read Gen 16 as Abraham’s story, really he is marginal to it. Its opening makes one anticipate a story about Sarah, and at first she controls the plot. The story’s problem is that Sarah cannot give Abraham a son (v. 1a). Its question is whether Sarah can solve the problem, and initially it seems she can (vv. 1-4a). But Hagar’s pregnancy complicates Sarah’s position, and she tries to regain control, but her action complicates things some more (vv. 4b-6); the pattern is like the one in 12:9-20. Sarah then disappears from the story as agent or potential mother; the references to her in the third person (vv. 8, 9) underscore the point. While Hagar is instructed to go back and submit to her, we are not told whether she did. And when the baby is born, Sarah is nowhere to be seen.

Sarah and Hagar were mistress and maidservant, wealthy and poor, Israelite and Egyptian, both of them Abraham’s wives, infertile and pregnant, two women who thus came to look down on each other. Gen 16 is a story about the suffering of two women and the conflict between them, in which Abraham has only a supporting (?) role. But the most prominent person in the story is Hagar. One could then say that the question underlying the story is, how did an Egyptian servant girl come to be the mother of Abraham’s firstborn (vv. 15-16)? The short answer is, because her mistress could not conceive (vv. 1-4a). And the story could have gone straight from vv. 1-4a to vv. 15-16. Indeed, *Jub* 14:21-24 makes it do so:

And Abram rejoiced, and he told all of these things to Sarai his wife. And he believed that he would have seed, but she did not give birth. And Sarai advised Abram, her husband, and she said to him: “Go into Hagar, my Egyptian maid. It may be that I will build seed for you from her.” And Abram heard his wife Sarai’s word and he said, “Do (it).” And Sarai took Hagar, her Egyptian maid, and she gave her to Abram, her husband, so that she might be a wife. And he went into her. And she conceived and bore a son and he called him Ishmael, in the fifth year of this week. And that year was the eighty-sixth year in the life of Abram.

In Gen 16 itself, the route from conception to birth is complicated:

1. Hagar’s pregnancy issued in problems between her and Sarah (vv. 4b)
2. Sarah fell into oppressing Hagar, and she ran away (vv. 5-6)
3. But Yahweh’s envoy sent her back (vv.7- 9).

Again, the story could have gone straight from there to the birth (from v. 9 to vv. 15-16). But the envoy’s meeting with Hagar delayed the denouement of the story further:

1. He made promises to her about the number of her descendants (v. 10)
2. He provided a significant name for her son (v. 11)
3. He outlined her son’s destiny (v. 12)
4. She made her response to God (vv. 13-14).

Although the chapter explains the identity of the Ishmaelites and the name of a well, there is thus so much more to it than this explanatory function requires. And while the story is set in the context of the wider narrative that relates how Yahweh’s promise works out, Gen 16 itself makes no reference to that theme as its context.[[247]](#footnote-247) While it does take further the motif of the promise of a son, Gen 16 is the first of a number of stories in Genesis of women who assert responsibility for their own destiny[[248]](#footnote-248) and stories about family conflict—conflict between brothers and between wives. It contains no direct clues to a historical or social context beyond the realities of contexts in which such issues are important to people. It is the first of two stories about conflict between Sarah, Abraham, and Hagar; traditionally, Gen 21 is seen as an Elohistic version, Gen 16 as a conflation of J and P versions.

**16:1-4a.** Gen 15 began with the anxiety, resentment, grief, disillusion and sense of failure on the part of a man when he and his wife have not been able to have children. Gen 16 begins with the grief, resentment, anxiety, disillusion and sense of failure on the part of a woman. For women even more than for men these are cross-cultural realities. Only a woman experiences menstruation, conception, pregnancy, birthing, nursing, weaning, and the menopause, and these realities are integral to womanhood (to womanhood in general; different women feel differently about them). Most specifically, Sarah has not born children “for him.” She feels she has failed as a wife. (Neither is concerned about the fulfillment of Yahweh’s broader promise and purpose.) It’s hard to know what to do in circumstances such as not being able to have a baby. It would be nice to think that Sarah prayed about her experience, like Hannah (1 Sam 1); the Scriptures do urge people to pray and protest to God about such experiences and they sometimes relate spectacular answers from God. But they also imply recognition that other such prayers are met with silence. And they relate with sympathy the way people do what they must do in tough circumstances. The audience should not be too hard on Sarah, or on Abraham if he didn’t know what to do at any point in this story.

Sarah has an Egyptian maidservant, Hagar (v. 1b). We immediately thus discover three significant facts about her. She is an Egyptian, which suggests she is part of Abraham and Sarah’s family as a result of the Egyptian escapade related in 12:9—13:4. *GenAp* 20:31-32 relates how Pharaoh gave her to Sarah. Like the servant girl in 2 Kings 5, she is a long way from home, though not an impossibly long way. She will set off for home in this story, but Yahweh will not let her get there; it is better to be a foreigner in this family through which Yahweh is at work than to be at home in Egypt (cf. Heb 11:24-26), though it would be hard to believe it, and as far as we know she has no way of realizing it at the moment. Her position means she is neither one thing nor the other. She is an Egyptian, but she is in Canaan. She is part of Abraham’s family, but she is a foreigner. Paul’s connecting Hagar with Mount Sinai “in Arabia” (Gal 4:25) may link with references to “the Hagrites” in the First Testament (e.g., Ps 83:6 [7]).[[249]](#footnote-249) A second fact about her is that she is a maidservant or servant girl, the female equivalent to a servant. In her relationship to Sarah she is a young female equivalent to the senior male servant of Yahweh who will play a key role in Gen 24. That male servant belongs to Abraham and works for him in his capacity as master of the household; Hagar belongs to Sarah and works for her in her capacity as mistress of the household. The stories in Gen 24 and 2 Kings 5 show that a servant’s position need not be unpleasant or unrewarding, and it is misleading to think of such servants as “slaves” in the Euro-American sense, but the Hagar story will go on to show that their position can be vulnerable to the whim of their master or mistress. You might be born as a servant, because your parents were servants. You or your family might hit hard times and no longer be able to survive independently and thus you might have to enter service, and you might then be bought by a different master. You might be captured in war. We don’t know how Hagar had originally come to be a servant. We know that there were other maidservants in the household (12:16); Hagar is Sarah’s personal assistant. The third fact about her is that we know her name. We don’t know the name of the servant in Gen 24 or the servant girl in 2 Kings 5, but Genesis gives us the names of all three servant girls it mentions (the others are Zilpah and Bilhah), though in each case it may be because of their sons’ significance. Recording her name does contribute to Hagar’s becoming a real person in the story. It also makes for a contrast with Abraham and Sarah’s never using her name. To them she is simply “my/your maidservant.” To Yahweh she is an individual and the object of his care, not just the vessel of Abraham and Sarah’s child and the means of achieving his purpose.[[250]](#footnote-250)

Sarah herself has a theology or spirituality (v. 2a). Gen 11:30 had described her as infertile and as having no children; the latter was an empirical fact, while the former was a plausible inference about her physical nature (only now does it become clearer that the problem is not Abraham’s). Her own observation more than a decade later, according to v. 3, is that she is childless because Yahweh has held her back from conceiving. The verb (*’āṣar*) is used several times in this connection; in another recurrent use it refers to Yahweh stopping up the sky so no rain falls. The First Testament doesn’t suggest that every time a woman cannot have children it means Yahweh has closed her womb any more than every time the rain fails it means Yahweh has stopped up the sky (though perhaps at one level that would be true). Often it’s “just one of those things.” The First Testament does assume that Yahweh sometimes deliberately takes this action; ironically, Abraham and Sarah will shortly cause it to happen to some other women (20:18). But it’s hard to move from the general (“Yahweh sometimes closes wombs”) to the particular (“Yahweh has closed my womb”), as it is impossible to move from the particular (“Yahweh has opened my womb”) to the general (“Yahweh always opens wombs”). This narrative does not comment on whether Sarah was right. Further, as well as having a theology, Sarah has a strategy, as do many would-be parents. In Western culture the strategy may involve in vitro fertilization or surrogacy. Sarah’s proposal involves a form of surrogacy known in traditional societies where an infertile woman arranges or agrees for her husband to have sex with another woman whose child would then count as the infertile woman’s child.[[251]](#footnote-251) The act is thus not adultery; it does not involve illicit sex on the part of a married person. It is more an aspect of or a variant on polygamy—and in this case, v. 3 relates that Sarah does give Hagar to Abraham as a second wife. Maybe Sarah will then be able to “build herself up” though Hagar (cf.30:3). She will become a house(hold), whereas at the moment she and Abraham are simply a couple. Maybe she is concerned to have someone to pass on her dowry.[[252]](#footnote-252) Maybe she also knows that mothers who adopt sometimes mysteriously then get pregnant when they couldn’t before. There’s no suggestion that she is operating on the basis of a “works-righteousness.”[[253]](#footnote-253) There’s nothing wrong in principle with taking such an initiative; Rachel and Leah do so.[[254]](#footnote-254) And there’s nothing to raise questions about whether it’s a “good-faith offer.”[[255]](#footnote-255)

Abraham agrees (v. 2b). Why not? It was an acceptable procedure in the culture. Abraham took decisive action in 13:5-18 and in 14:1-24 and Yahweh got involved in the events. But here “no mighty patriarch is Abram, but rather the silent, acquiescent, and minor figure in a drama between two women.”[[256]](#footnote-256) And maybe it’s worrying that the sequence of the woman making a suggestion and the man agreeing to it without thinking too much has an unfortunate precedent (“you listened to the voice of your wife”: 3:17). Further, Abraham’s taking decisive action in 12:9—13:4 had ambiguous results. And one wonders whether with hindsight and recalling the dialogue in 15:20, Abraham might have concluded that consulting Yahweh about Sarah’s suggestion would have been a good idea. “How we are to assess Sarai’s attempt to circumvent her sterility is shrouded in ambiguity.”[[257]](#footnote-257)

Anyway, Sarah arranges and concludes a marriage (v. 3), giving her servant-girl (who is likely a teenager) to a man who is old enough to be her father or grandfather. There is some irony about Sarah repeating the treatment she received at her husband’s hands in Egypt.[[258]](#footnote-258) But nothing happens that would necessarily seem odd to any of the parties. To judge from regulations in the Torah that are designed to restrain abuse, a man might well marry one of his household’s servant girls or a servant girl who had been captured in war (see Exod 21:2-11; Deut 21:10-14). The girl might or might not have a choice, as Rebekah did about marrying Isaac, sight unseen (Gen 24). We learn nothing about Hagar having any say in what happens. But a servant girl might regard such a marriage as a great step up in the world, in terms of status and of economic security. There is further irony about the language Genesis uses. Normally a man “gets” a wife or his parents “get” one for him (e.g., 4:19; 11:29; 12:19; 20:2; 21:21; 24:4; 25:1, 20; 28:2; 34:4). Here a wife gets another wife for her husband. And while there is something sad about a wife having to make this arrangement, the son of a polygamous marriage once told me that his mother was only too pleased to have a hand in choosing one of her friends to be his father’s second wife. Hagar would presumably be a “secondary wife,” as 25:6 implies (and see 22:24),[[259]](#footnote-259) but Genesis here uses the ordinary word for a woman or a wife which it used for Sarah. The unnecessary repetition of this word to describe Sarah at the beginning of the verse (after all, we know that Sarah is Abraham’s wife) and then its appearance as the last word in the verse does underline the incongruity of what happens for Western readers. But ten years have passed, so can Sarah be blamed? (This verse provided Jewish thinking with an argument to allow a man to divorce his wife after ten years if she had not been able to have children: see e.g., *GenR* 45:2).

The strategy works (v. 4a). What does Abraham think? What are Abraham’s fantasies about sex with a nubile dark-skinned girl? The story is not concerned with such questions, and it implies that Abraham would not be concerned. It’s a marital act, but it’s a transaction. The important consideration is what follows when they all discover that Hagar is pregnant.

**16:4b-6**. Not surprisingly, the pregnancy changes the dynamics in the relationship of Sarah and Hagar. “Rather than solving the problem… this plan soon resulted in the first "love triangle" in the Bible.”[[260]](#footnote-260) It would seem likely to change the women’s relationships with Abraham, too, but Genesis gives no hints in this direction and it does seem to imply that for Abraham the sexual relationship was simply a transaction. One could understand Genesis to be commenting in v. 4b that Sarah became diminished in her own eyes;[[261]](#footnote-261) it would not be surprising if Hagar’s pregnancy had that effect. But in Sarah’s view—v. 5 will tell us—she has become diminished in Hagar’s eyes. Hagar is now “a woman with attitude.”[[262]](#footnote-262) She is guilty of “reckless eyeballing.”[[263]](#footnote-263) Again, it would not be surprising if this young foreign servant was rather proud of the fact that she could get pregnant when her mistress couldn’t, that Yahweh had favored her as he had not favored Sarah. “In conceiving a child for her mistress, Hagar has seen a new reality that challenges the power structure.”[[264]](#footnote-264) In this entourage, Sarah has the power, but Hagar has the functioning womb and she threatens to outrank her; Sarah becomes a nobody.[[265]](#footnote-265) But unbeknown to Hagar, that effect of getting pregnant was scary. “The person who diminishes you I will curse,” Yahweh had promised Abraham (12:3). Hagar might have heard stories about servant girls in her position who became uppity and thought they might replace the first wife—a development that Hammurabi’s Law Code #145-46 regulates against[[266]](#footnote-266) (cf. also Prov 30:21-23).

Once again Sarah has a theology or spirituality (v. 5). She feels violated by Hagar. This feeling might seem an overreaction (see the use of the word *ḥāmās* in 6:11, 13 and the comment), but it is apparently a real reaction, and the word “violation” may suggest a fear of the development Hammurabi presupposes. Anyway, it’s Abraham’s fault; one might see these words, too, as hard to justify, given that it was her idea not his. Now she wants Yahweh to decide who’s responsible and who therefore needs to do something about it. It is in principle an appropriate stance, and she is clear what Yahweh’s judgment will be, like David in 1 Sam 24:12, 15 [13, 16].[[267]](#footnote-267) Yahweh, after all, is supposed to be one who “cares for the weak and oppressed who cannot help themselves.”[[268]](#footnote-268) Implicitly Sarah is also suggesting that Abraham needs to accept some responsibility for the actions of his new wife, as head of the household, rather than leaving God to sort it out. “Why does the Holy Spirit mention these quarrels?... Was there nothing more important or more profitable to record?” But it is useful to us that the scriptures speak of such realities.[[269]](#footnote-269)

Perhaps Abraham accepts responsibility (v. 6), though he “may well have sighed privately over his temperamental wife (Prov 25:24; 27:15; Sir 25:16ff; 25:6-7).”[[270]](#footnote-270) Either he then subcontracts responsibility to Sarah and gives her the power to decide what should be done, or he assumes that Hagar’s being his (secondary) wife doesn’t change her status as Sarah’s maidservant—and Sarah is in charge of her maidservants. Encouraging Sarah to do what is good in her eyes might again follow unwise precedents (see 3:6; 6:2). The action it encourages is not merely a restoration of or insistence on Hagar’s maidservant status. It encourages Sarah to put her down. The hand to which Abraham surrenders Hagar is “a hard hand, which humbles the hated rival.”[[271]](#footnote-271) Is Sarah powerless to control her own rage over her infertility and the humiliation it has brought her?[[272]](#footnote-272) While her action corresponds to the rule in Hammurabi about putting the maidservant in her place, “humble” (‘*ānāh* piel) was ironically the word that described Hagar’s compatriots’ coming treatment of Sarah’s offspring (15:13). Sarah indeed treats Hagar as more like a slave than a servant (again, cf. Deut 21:14). It’s not surprising that Hagar takes flight (*bāraḥ*): again it’s a word that will apply to the Israelites escaping from Egypt (Exod 14:5). Hard masters always take the risk of servants fleeing (cf. Deut 23:15-16 [16-17]). Even if you’re pregnant “better all the dangers of the desert path than humiliation in Sarah’s tent.”[[273]](#footnote-273) As Abraham has not worried too much about his unborn child in telling Sarah she can do as she wishes with Hagar, so Sarah has not worried too much about him in the way she has treated her, and so Hagar runs away with the future of Abraham’s child in her womb.[[274]](#footnote-274) She also thereby “denies Sarai’s claim of Hagar’s child as hers, heir to Abram.”[[275]](#footnote-275) Hagar takes responsibility for herself and her future and her baby.[[276]](#footnote-276)

**16:7-9**. So far, it’s been a very human story, sadly familiar, with its first scene ending in disaster for all concerned: “Hagar has lost her home, Sarai her maid, and Abram his second wife and newborn child.”[[277]](#footnote-277) Perhaps no one escapes it without some discredit,[[278]](#footnote-278) though the story’s ambiguities make it inappropriate to focus on allocating blame.[[279]](#footnote-279) Now something supernatural occurs, as happens in a number of these stories (see 12:1 within 11:27—12:8; 12:17 within 12:9—13:4; 13:14-17 within 13:5-18).

It’s the first appearance of an envoy from Yahweh (v. 7). Such an envoy (*mal’āk*) is like a presidential aide sent to investigate some question or to implement a presidential decision. LXX’s translation *angelos*, suggesting a messenger, is misleading, as is English “angel”; the Hebrew word is related to *mᵉlā’kāh*, whichis simply “work.” This envoy is out on the job looking for Hagar on Yahweh’s behalf. “Hagar was not running away in order to find God, but an ‘angel of Yahweh’ found her running.”[[280]](#footnote-280) To Hagar it would just seem an ordinary man (cf. 18:2 in association with 19:1). Being found in the wilderness by a man or by Yahweh’s envoy might or might not be good news; it will turn out to be a mixture. Presumably Yahweh sent this aide, but Genesis has no explanation for the sending. God does not usually send an aide after a runaway slave, though Abraham might do so. But Hagar has become no ordinary runaway. She is carrying Abraham’s child. Shur is a wilderness area on the inland route from Canaan to Egypt (cf. 20:1; 25:18; Exod 15:22-23). The road to or through Shur would be a natural place to look for Hagar as she tried to get back home to Egypt. She will have been walking for a week. Has she stopped by the spring just to get a drink and a rest, or to stay overnight, or to hitch a ride, or to see if some kinder master will take her into his entourage, or is she giving up her impossible trek, or is she nearly home?

The envoy is the first person to address Hagar (v. 8), and he addresses her by name. His questions are the natural ones to ask of a fellow-traveler. For Yahweh’s envoy they are questions to which one would have thought he already knew the answers, as is the case with Yahweh in Gen 3—4. After all, he knew her name and he knew where to find her. But at least part of what is going on is that Hagar needs to articulate the answers to herself and to him and to the people listening to her story. However, she replies only to the first of the envoy’s questions; while we have assumed that she is on her way home to Egypt, she does not talk about it. Even revealing what she does reveal might have been dangerous; there could be a reward for returning a runaway servant.

In fact the envoy moves in that direction (v. 9). Indeed, his response might seem extraordinarily hard, and the instruction to walk a week back again is not its toughest aspect. “It is the most pointed counter-example to the misleading over-generalization… that the biblical God is on the side of the impoverished and the oppressed.”[[281]](#footnote-281) Why does he make this requirement of her? Because Hagar is the maidservant and Sarah is the mistress. Hagar is to return to her mistress, not to her husband. But behind that fact is Sarah’s being the wife of the man whose baby Hagar is carrying. Yes, Hagar had got drawn into that family though which Yahweh is at work, and she cannot be allowed out of it, even if it means humbling, suffering, harsh treatment. In the long run, it will be in her interests, too. Indeed, perhaps the envoy is concerned with her interests even in the short run. She is a pregnant woman out in the desert, perhaps with still some distance to go before she reaches her former home. Perhaps he’s not simply being tough but rescuing her. Her story illustrates how “God is intimately involved with those who suffer, but often not in a cataclysmic way.”[[282]](#footnote-282)

**16:10-12.** That understanding fits with the further things he has to say. If Sarah had become diminished in Hagar’s eyes, she had laid herself open to Yahweh’s curse (Gen 12:1-3), but instead the envoy blesses her in a way that fits the promise to Abraham in those verses. “To accompany Hagar on her return, God showers her with promises.”[[283]](#footnote-283) Putting the words of blessing in poetic lines underlines their importance and authority. Again as often happens, the aide speaks as if he is Yahweh. It is Yahweh’s own words that he is passing on: see v. 13. Indeed, it is the envoy’s key function—he actually is a messenger. “God is present not in the messenger, but in the message.”[[284]](#footnote-284)

The first poetic line (v. 10 is full of resonances. Genesis has spoken before about Yahweh determining to “make very numerous”, to “make very great”: he said it at 3:16, that other occasion when a man listened too easily to his wife. Yahweh then went on to speak about the pain of the woman’s pregnancy. Here he promises to make very great the woman’s offspring—great in the sense of numerous, as the parallel colon indicates; 25:12-18 will relate the fulfillment of the promise. This promise about offspring does pick up Yahweh’s promise to the man whose child she will bear. It especially recalls 15:5 with its reference to the impossibility of counting up how many there are. The promise will be repeated for him and for Isaac and for Jacob; Hagar is the only woman to whom it is given. The necessity for her to return to Abraham and Sarah is implicit. Her offspring needs to be born in that context.

For the third time in three verses (v. 11a) Genesis notes that it is Yahweh’s envoy who speaks the words that will follow. The repetition underscores that they are to be taken seriously, whether they are a hard bidding or an encouraging promise. The bidding has to be seen in light of the promise and the promise in light of the bidding, as was the case in Yahweh’s first words to Abraham (12:1-3). These words by the envoy constitute the first occurrence of a formulation that will recur in the Scriptures, though each occurrence has a distinctive significance in its context.[[285]](#footnote-285) Such announcements of a son’s birth to women who are not expecting to have one may include the appearing of an envoy and a greeting, an announcement of a coming pregnancy and of the birth of a son, the specifying of the boy’s name and an explanation of it, and a declaration about what will become of him (see Judg 13:3-5; Isa 7:14-16; Luke 1:18-22).

Here, the follow-up promise (v. 11b) indeed first adds the child’s sex and then determines his name. If Hagar was tempted to think it was a tough requirement that she should go back to submit to Sarah’s ill-treatment, then the explanation might take the edge off that sense that Yahweh was treating her as hard as Sarah had, and not paying much attention to Hagar herself. Actually Yahweh has been listening to Sarah’s treatment of her, and Hagar is to name her son accordingly. The name “Ishmael” recurs elsewhere (e.g., 2 Kings 25:23, 25; 1 Chron 8:38); in regular usage it would likely express his parents prayer for their child, “May God listen.” Here it constitutes an affirmation. Ishmael is the first person to be named before being born.[[286]](#footnote-286) Genesis has not told us that Sarah prayed in light of her conviction that Yahweh had closed her womb or that Hagar prayed in light of her suffering. It does tell us that God was listening to the harshness of what Sarah said to Hagar and did to her. Sarah declared the hope that Yahweh would decide between herself and Abraham; he has decided between her and Hagar. As happens in other passages (not least 14:18-23), Genesis combines the reference to El in Ishmael’s name (compare the name Israel) with a reference to Yahweh, whom the envoy does represent but whose name someone living in Abraham’s day would not use.

Then there is the child’s destiny (v. 12). Half-Egyptian, half-Abrahamic, his mother a maidservant and a secondary wife, what chance does he have? But Ishmael will not be someone you can mess with. He’ll be like the wild donkeys of the wilderness that you can’t tame (cf. Job 39:5-8). “He will be free among men…. No stranger will rule over him.”[[287]](#footnote-287) If people want to be in conflict with him, he will give as good as he gets. Like the story about Noah, Ham, and Canaan in Gen 9, for the audience this declaration about Ishmael may explain why the Ishmaelites are the people they are. The Ishmaelites feature in Mesopotamian inscriptions from Israelite times and they are traditionally understood to be the ancestors of the Arabs. But there are few references to them in the First Testament, and no indications of poor relationships with Israel (indeed, see e.g., 1 Chron 2:17; 27:30). They are strange, yet they are family.[[288]](#footnote-288) The envoy’s characterization of Ishmael as aggressive and determined may suggest that he will be a true son of his father as Abraham was portrayed in Gen 14.

**16:13-14.** Hagar’s response adds a naming of God to the narrative’s naming of her. “Hagar is a theologian,”[[289]](#footnote-289) the Scriptures’ first theologian, and the only person in the First Testament who gives God a name. The context of this declaration indicates the nature of theology as a response to a recognition that God has spoken to you; Hagar has recognized it. The form of the declaration, “You are…,” also marks Hagar as someone who addresses God in praise (cf. Ps 77:14 [15].[[290]](#footnote-290) She knows that theology is doxology. It is paradoxical that Genesis says that Hagar is giving a name to Yahweh, given that she wouldn’t know that Yahweh was the name of the God she was naming. She gives him a name that incorporates the term for God in Ishmael’s name and that thus also parallels the one Melchizedek used. He had called God *’ēl ‘elyôn*; Hagar calls God *’ēl rŏ’î*. He is “God of seeing/sight,” which nicely covers both “God who sees” and “God whom I see.” He had spoken of hearing—hearing her ill-treatment at the hands of Sarah, the truth expressed in Ishmael’s name. She speaks of his seeing—seeing her on the run. She knows that seeing Yahweh’s envoy is more or less the same as seeing God, though without the danger. He has seen her; she has seen him. The movement between talk of the envoy and of Yahweh himself will recur in 31:11-14.

The well also gained its name from what happened there (v. 14)—or at least, the name reminded people of this story. Again, some of the people listening to the story would know the well. At that well God had made himself known as “The-one-who-sees-me-lives” or “the one who lives sees me,” as he had made himself known at Jerusalem as God On High. So they would call on God by that name at this well. Its location near Qadesh (cf. 14:7) is on the way from Mamre to Shur, though we don’t know where Bered is.

**16:15-16**. Presumablythe story assumes that Hagar does as the envoy says, but it doesn’t say so, and specifically it doesn’t say that she returns to Sarah. If anything, she returns to Abraham. She has her son, and Abraham names him in accordance with what the envoy said to her and the fact that she has borne his child. While one might have liked the story to end with Hagar’s naming the child (mothers and/or fathers can name children in the First Testament), Abraham’s naming him confirms his recognition and acceptance of the child and the child’s clear place at the center of the family. On the other hand, Sarah’s not naming him and the omission of any reference to her at the close of the story, though she had been the one who set going the process whereby he was born, implies that her hope that through him she might build herself up has not been realized.[[291]](#footnote-291) It is Abraham who gets built up (he is maybe 45 or 50 in our terms), and so does Hagar. So the story doesn’t resolve the tension from which it started; it drops the tension for new motifs,[[292]](#footnote-292) as sometimes happens to family conflicts. In other respects the story comes to a happy end with God’s promise fulfilled and no rebuke on God’s part.

## Hagar and Ishmael

Genesis 12—22 can be plausibly read concentrically:[[293]](#footnote-293)

12a The call; blessing promised

12b Abram in a foreign land; wife-sister motif

13-14 Lot in danger; Sodom

15 Covenant

16 Hagar and Ishmael

17 Covenant

18-19 Lot in danger; Sodom

20 Abraham in a foreign land; wife-sister motif

21 Hagar and Ishmael

22 The call; blessing confirmed

It is then a feature of the palistrophe that Hagar and Ishmael come at its center, and disturb it again before it comes to an end.[[294]](#footnote-294) The story illustrates how “God has not exclusively committed himself to Abraham-Sarah. God’s concern is not confined to the elect line. There is passion and concern for the troubled ones who stand outside that line.”[[295]](#footnote-295) Yahweh listens to the humbling of Hagar as he will listen to the humbling of the Israelites in Egypt. Yahweh sees her and makes himself known to her as the one who is looking after her as he will see the Israelites’ suffering under the Egyptians. He lets Hagar see him in the Sinai desert as he will let Moses see him in the Sinai desert. He is involved in the destiny of the Ishmaelites as he is involved in the destiny of the Israelites even though they have different places in the working out of his purpose. And humanity’s wild donkeys with their fierceness and aggressiveness are among the people made in his image. The question is only what they do with their fierceness and aggressiveness.

“In the messenger’s greeting Hagar has met God in action, reaching the earth and beholding the human in her distress.” Abraham and Sarah may have acted in accordance with Middle Eastern law and custom, but God implicitly critiques it.[[296]](#footnote-296) Luke 1 then reaches back to the Hagar story when it “narrates a similar meeting with a messenger of God, which evokes the same reaction: ‘For he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.’” Further, God’s self-revelation here through his messenger suggests a way of understanding his self-revelation through Jesus. The person of the messenger of Yahweh, both divine and human, suggests a biblical (rather than Greek) starting point for thinking about the incarnation.[[297]](#footnote-297)

But in a Western and post-colonial context it is important to note that Hagar is an African woman.[[298]](#footnote-298) And “for more than a hundred years Hagar — the African slave of the Hebrew woman Sarah — has appeared in the deposits of African-American culture. Sculptors, writers, poets, scholars, preachers and just plain folks have passed along the biblical figure Hagar to generation after generation of black folks.”[[299]](#footnote-299) Women who experience “slavery, poverty, ethnicity, sexual and economic exploitation, surrogacy, rape, domestic violence, homelessness, motherhood, single-parenting and radical encounters with God”[[300]](#footnote-300) have been able to find themselves in Hagar’s story. The encounter with God is God’s encounter with her, and she is someone whom the story treats “with special honors.”[[301]](#footnote-301) In scholarly writing over recent decades, her story has become a dominant them in the study of Genesis 12—50.[[302]](#footnote-302)

Appreciative and troubled readings of Hagar’s story overlap with appreciative and troubled readings of Paul’s Letter to Philemon. Paul’s sending Onesimus back to Philemon follows the example of the envoy in the Hagar story, though Onesimus is a slave in the Roman sense and not merely a servant in the Middle Eastern sense. One would prefer both the servant and the slave to be freed, but both the envoy and the apostle combine realism with theological considerations. The envoy is perhaps being realistic about a pregnant woman trekking through the desert, and is taking account of whose baby she is carrying (not Sarah’s!). The apostle is perhaps being realistic about the integral place of slavery in the life of the Roman Empire, and is taking account of the revolution that Jesus has nevertheless brought to the relationship of masters and slaves. “God liberates and God does not always liberate the oppressed. God speaks comforting words to the survival and quality-of-life struggle of many families.”[[303]](#footnote-303) God “does not always liberate the oppressed as they would like, but… hears and responds to the cry of the desperate.” Thus “God is at work in both liberation and survival” and we need a theology of support and care and a theology of survival. [[304]](#footnote-304)

# Genesis 17:1-27—The Pact and Its Sign

## Overview

Like Gen 15, this chapter reports Yahweh’s intention to make a pact with Abraham (the word “pact” comes thirteen times, more than any other chapter in the Scriptures) to give him many descendants and to give him the land of Canaan as his possession. Whereas Gen 15 speaks most of the land but also of the descendants, Gen 17 speaks most of the descendants but also of the land. In Gen 15 Yahweh solemnizes the pact on his part by a visible ritual; in Gen 17 Abraham implements the pact on his part by a visible sign. In Gen 17 God

* declares that the pact will be permanent and heightens other aspects of the promises
* gives Abraham and Sarah new names
* requires of the men in the family the practice of circumcision
* insists that the main promise will be fulfilled through a son that Sarah will yet bear
* adds a promise for Ishmael and emphasizes the inclusion of the rest of the household.

Gen 17 has been seen as the highpoint or “watershed” of the Abraham story.[[305]](#footnote-305) One might then see it as answering the question, what is the fundamental nature of God’s pact or covenant with Abraham and thus with Israel? The answer is that it involves

* God’s age-long promise that Abraham’s offspring will be a numerous people, that they will possess the land of Canaan, and that he will be God for them.
* Their practice of circumcision, their living transparently in integrity before him, and their recognizing their membership of a larger family.

## Translation

1Abram was a man of ninety-nine years. Yahweh appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am El Šadday. Walk about before me and be a person of integrity; 2and I will make[[306]](#footnote-306) my pact between me and you, and make you very, very numerous.” 3Abram fell on his face.

God spoke with him: 4”I myself—here is my pact with you. You will become the ancestor of a horde of nations. 5You will no longer be named Abram: your name will be Abraham, because I am making you[[307]](#footnote-307) the “ancestor of a horde” of nations. 6I will enable you to be very, very fruitful and make you into nations. From you kings will go out. 7I will implement my pact between me and you and your offspring after you, through their generations, as an age-long pact, to be God for you and for your offspring after you. 8I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the country where you are residing as aliens, the entire country of Kena‘an, as an age-long holding, and I will be God for them.”

9And God said to Abraham, “But you: my pact you’re to keep, you and your offspring after you, through their generations. 10This is my pact that you people are[[308]](#footnote-308) to keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: every male being circumcised on your part.[[309]](#footnote-309) 11You’re to be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin.[[310]](#footnote-310) It will be a sign of a pact between me and you. 12As a child of eight days, every male is to be circumcised on your part, through your generations. One born in the household or acquired for silver from any foreigner, who doesn’t belong to your offspring: 13he is definitely to be circumcised,[[311]](#footnote-311) one born in your household or acquired for silver. My pact in your flesh will be an age-long pact. 14A foreskinned male, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin:[[312]](#footnote-312) that person will be cut off from his people. He has contravened[[313]](#footnote-313) my pact.”

15And God said to Abraham: “Śaray, your wife: you’re not to name her Śaray, because her name will be Śarah. 16I will bless her. I am indeed giving you a son from her. I will bless her and she will become nations; there will be kings of peoples from her.”[[314]](#footnote-314) 17Abraham fell on his face, laughed,[[315]](#footnote-315) and said to himself, “To a man of a hundred years will a child be born, or will Śarah—will a woman of ninety years give birth?”[[316]](#footnote-316)

18Abraham said to God, “If only Yišma‘e’l might live before you.” 19God said, “Well: Śarah your wife, she’s going to give birth to a son for you, and you’re to name him Yiṣḥaq. I will implement my pact with him as an age-long pact for his offspring after him. 20As for Yišma‘e’l: I’ve listened. There, I am blessing him. I will enable him to be fruitful and very, very numerous. Twelve leaders he will father, and I will make him a big nation. 21But my pact I will implement with Yiṣḥaq, to whom Śarah will give birth for you at this set time next year.” 22So he finished speaking with him. And God withdrew[[317]](#footnote-317) from Abraham.

23So Abraham got Yišma‘e’l his son and all those born in his household and all those acquired with his silver, every male among the people in Abraham’s household, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin, on that very day, as God had spoken with him. 24Abraham was a man of ninety-nine years when he was circumcised (the flesh of his foreskin),[[318]](#footnote-318) 25while Yišma‘e’l his son was a boy of thirteen years when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. 26On this very day Abraham was circumcised, he and Yišma‘e’l his son, 27and all the men in his household, born in the household and acquired with silver from a foreigner—they were circumcised with him.

## Interpretation

Even more than Gen 15, and in contrast to Gen 16, for the most part Gen 17 is not much of a narrative,[[319]](#footnote-319) until the end, nor even a dialogue,[[320]](#footnote-320) but a piece of theological teaching,[[321]](#footnote-321) laying down a rule.

Vv. 1-3a God appears and speaks; Abraham falls on his face

Vv. 3b-8 God speaks to Abraham, making promises (“I myself…”)

Vv. 9-14 God speaks to Abraham, issuing requirements (“but you…”)

Vv. 15-16 God speaks to Abraham about Sarah, making promises (“Śaray, your wife…”)

V. 17 Abraham falls on his face and speaks to himself

V. 18 Abraham speaks to God

Vv. 19-21 God responds

V. 22 God finishes speaking and disappears

Vv. 23-26 Abraham does as God said

For the third time in Genesis, Yahweh takes an initiative in speaking to Abraham.

* In 12:1-8 Yahweh promises him increase and a land

(In 12:9—14:24 Yahweh reasserts his promises, in response to an initiative by Abraham)

* In 15:1-21 Yahweh promises him increase and land and undergirds the promise by making a pact

(In 16:1-16 Yahweh reasserts his promises, in response to an initiative by Sarah)

* In 17:1-27 Yahweh promises him increase and land, undergirds the promise by making a pact, and four times repeats that the promises are permanent

After this systematic account, there is no more to be said.[[322]](#footnote-322)

The stress on permanence in Gen 17 suggests that one question behind the chapter is whether there is a time-limit to God’s promises.[[323]](#footnote-323) The declaration that there is no time-limit would be important to the listeners in contexts when it might seem that the two promises no longer applied. The eighth and seventh centuries would be such a context, when Ephraim was cut down and then overrun by Assyria. The Babylonian period would be such a context, especially for Judahites in exile. And the Persian period would be such a context, when Judah is a tiny remnant in land and population.

The stress on God’s initiative in making promises is accompanied by the laying down of a condition that is not hard to fulfill and that we have no record of the people failing to fulfill, unlike (say) Sabbath observance, at least until the second century (see e.g., 1 Macc 1:15, 48, 60-61).[[324]](#footnote-324) To the people of God the chapter therefore says, “You’re circumcised, aren’t you? So you qualify to see God’s promise fulfilled. And here is the promise!” The audience know that Yahweh fulfilled his crazy promise about Sarah having a baby, at which Abraham laughed; the reminder would be an encouragement to believe the impossible in their day (cf. Isa 51:1-2).[[325]](#footnote-325)

The focus on Ishmael in Gen 17 may suggest another question underlying the chapter, as well as underlying Gen 16. Gen 17 leaves Ishmael in an ambiguous position. He is circumcised like everyone else, yet the covenant belongs to Isaac. The Israelites knew the Ishmaelites, knew they were related to them, knew they were not their enemies, knew (apparently) that Ishmael had been Abraham’s first son. So what is the status of Ishmael’s line?

As an account of God making a covenant, Gen 17 is traditionally seen as P’s equivalent to Gen 15. It generally speaks of “God” rather than of “Yahweh” (the occurrence of this name in v. 1 would be a result of the process whereby the sources were combined) and it manifests P’s characteristic liking for figures. As the P creation story provided the rationale for observing the Sabbath and the P Noah story provided the validation for the rule about abstaining from blood, the P Abraham story here explains the origin of circumcision.[[326]](#footnote-326) Gen 18 will again tell of God promising that Sarah will have a baby in her old age. So Gen 17 is the P version of Gen 18 as well as the P version of Gen 15.

**17:1-3a**. Thirteen years have passed since the birth of Ishmael; he is about to become a man. Abraham has reason to be living a relaxed life as he goes about his business of looking after sheep confident in the fulfillment of God’s promise through Ishmael (and maybe there is no reason for Sarah and Hagar not to be relaxed about it, too, but we will hear nothing of them until chapters 18—21). Abraham is about to become a hundred years old, and there is no doubt that he and Sarah are people of maturity.[[327]](#footnote-327) But it is an appropriate age for something climactic to happen to him.[[328]](#footnote-328)

And Yahweh appears to him (v. 1b) as he did in 12:7 when he first made the promise of land; he had meanwhile spoken to him in a vision, in 15:1. Either way (appearance or vision) the point about the manifestation is the message that follows. The manifestation gives force and authenticity to the message. The message is not just something Abraham imagined. By his self-introduction Yahweh points up the momentousness of the message that is coming, as he did in 15:7. In keeping with recurrent practice in Genesis, while the narrator identifies him as Yahweh, it has him speaking of himself in a way appropriate to the period before the revelation of this name in Exodus. He declares, “I am El Shadday.” The name compares with El Elyon and El Ro’i, the names used by Mechizedek and Hagar. This name comes four more times in Gen 12—50 and then in Exod 6:3 (also Ezek 10:5); Shadday on its own occurs occasionally elsewhere, especially in Job, where it is again appropriate on the lips of people outside the sphere of the revelation of the name Yahweh. If we ignore the anachronistic use of the name Yahweh, in Gen 1-11 God is simply God; in Gen 12—50 he is characteristically El Shadday; it is with his appearing to Moses in Exodus that he becomes Yahweh. Whereas Genesis explicitly interprets El Ro’i, and the second element in El Elyon surely has the same meaning as it has in ordinary usage, the meaning of Shadday is not obvious, and neither Genesis nor the rest of the First Testament explains it. The nearest we get to an explanation is the link with the verb *šādad* in Isa 13:6, which would suggest the meaning “Devastator.” Possibly Vg’s translation “omnipotent” is a watered down version of an assumed link with *šādad*. But generally it’s simply a name, used outside contexts where the name Yahweh is appropriate. Here, LXX has simply “your God,” which corresponds to the expression’s suggestion of God’s nearness to his people.[[329]](#footnote-329)

God’s subsequent words in v. 1b follow the pattern of 12:1-3: first a command, then a promise. The command picks up the verb used of Enoch and Noah (5:22, 24; 6:9), though God speaks of walking about “before me” not “with me.” He may not be excluding Abraham’s walking with him as his friend, as Enoch and Noah did (cf. 2 Chron 20:7; Isa 41:8). But the imperative makes a difference. Whereas “stand before me” would suggest service (e.g., 41:46 and cf. Tg here), like the English expression “wait on,” “walk about before me” implies transparency.[[330]](#footnote-330) It suggests “live as if you were always in my presence. Who would not be ashamed to sin, even a little, in the presence of some great man, much less God?”[[331]](#footnote-331) God’s expectations regarding Abraham’s walking about, his living of his life, are spelled out as involving a life of integrity; this term, too, applied descriptively to Noah (6:9), the only other occurrence in Genesis. That’s what the walk needs to look like.

The promise which the prescription introduces (v. 2) is the establishing of a pact between the two parties, “a solemn, binding assurance which can correspond to an oath, and whose content can be the same as a promise.”[[332]](#footnote-332) God speaks neither of implementing this pact (P’s usual expression: see v. 7) nor of cutting it (J’s expression in Gen 15) but of making it or setting it or putting it, using the verb *nātan* which would more commonly suggest giving it, as in 9:12 (the only other occurrences of the phrase are Num 25:12 and Sir 44:22). The verb underlines further the generous and gracious nature of God’s action (cf. vv. 5, 6, 8, 16, 20 for more “giving”). The pact will be a “covenant of love,”[[333]](#footnote-333) a “covenant of grace abounding.”[[334]](#footnote-334) While it is a pact “with you,” later “between me and between you” (cf. 9:12), it’s really “my pact.”[[335]](#footnote-335) Yahweh is giving notice that this moment is an occasion when he is revising the terms of the pact between him and Abraham—in Abraham’s favor. God thus assumes the freedom from time to time to rework the terms of his pact with his people, like any great king. Sinai will be the great example. In a sense there is one pact between God and his people through the Scriptures,[[336]](#footnote-336) but in another sense there are many. Each time he revises the terms of the pact, God gives his people the chance to reaffirm their commitment to it—or better, he requires them to reaffirm their commitment to it. How does God’s expectation that his people should walk with integrity before him relate to his promises? The pact is being made now, when there is hardly time for the fulfillment of that requirement. In this sense the requirement of walking in integrity is not a condition of the making of the pact. Yet one should not be too rationalistic in asking such questions. The implication for the listeners is that there is always a link between the way we walk and the way God fulfills his promises. The promises demand that we walk right, even when the promises come first.

Abraham’s reaction (v. 3a) matches the fact that God has “appeared,” but it is an extreme such reaction. He will fall on his face again in v. 17 but the phrase will not then recur until Lev 9:24.

**17:3b-8.** God’s words rework his earlier promises. Abraham will become not merely a big nation (12:2; cf. also 13:16; 15:5; 16:10) but the ancestor of a horde of nations. While Genesis may go on to imply fulfillment of this promise in the existence of peoples such as the Ishmaelites, Edomites, Midianites, and Amalekites, who will feature in Genesis,[[337]](#footnote-337) “nations” in Gen 10 meant much more, and so may “nations” here.[[338]](#footnote-338) The promise about nations never recurs in the form of a reference to a “horde”; putting it that way leads into the change of name which follows. A horde is a *hāmôn*, and *’abrām* is now to become *’abrāhām* (v. 5). Names are often important in the Scriptures as they are in Western culture, where a change of name (e.g., on marriage) is often significant. Names are not just labels. Etymologically, we are not sure of the origin of the names *’abrām* or *’abrāhām*,[[339]](#footnote-339) and part of the point lies in the change itself. Naming gives expression to the fact that God is lord over Abraham[[340]](#footnote-340) (cf. the name changes in 2 Kings 23:34; 24:17, which have no significance beyond an assertion of imperial sovereignty). This naming does also suggest God’s doing something new for Abraham, an act of new creation.[[341]](#footnote-341)And it gives new expression to his promise and intention, through the paronomasia with the word for a horde; “the name focuses not on his personal relationship with God but on his relationship to the nations. The name looks outward.”[[342]](#footnote-342)

God’s promise of extraordinary fruitfulness (v. 6) draws attention to further implications of God’s undertakings in this chapter. Making numerous and fruitful were motifs in Gen 1 and again in Gen 8—9, while we have noted that talk of “nations” recurred in Gen 10. God set humanity going with the intention that it should be fruitful and numerous, God re-set humanity going with the same intention, and the growth of nations was a realization of that intention. Now Abraham is brought into connection with this objective. God’s intention in creation is to be realized in him and his offspring. There were no kings in Gen 10, but there were plenty in Gen 14, so God’s additional reference to kings nuances the point further.[[343]](#footnote-343)

God’s further reformulating of the pact (v. 7) involves making it permanent or age-long, like the Noah pact with the world as whole (9:12, 16), which makes for another way in which God’s dealings with Abraham implement his purpose for humanity as a whole. God also encapsulates the pact’s implications in terms of “being God for you and for your offspring.” Elsewhere, “I will be God for you and you will be a people for me” (e.g., Jer 31:33; Ezek 37:27) expresses the two-sided nature of this pact; here the other side of the relationship has been implied in v. 1 and will follow in vv. 9-14, and even on its own, the idea of being your God implies “so you had better treat me as such” (cf. Lev 11:45; 22:33). But in v. 7 God speaks only of being God for them, in keeping with the promissory nature of vv. 4-7 (cf. Exod 29:45, when God comes to dwell in the wilderness sanctuary).[[344]](#footnote-344)

The further spelling out of God’s commitment (v. 8) relates to the gift of the land, which is also to be permanent or age-long. God thus reconfirms the promise in 13:15, adding the word “holding” (*’ăḥuzzāh*). This term most often refers to the parcel of land that a family “holds” and of which it is (in theory) the secure and permanent possessor, though “owner” is not quite the word, as the land still belongs to God. Here God uses this word of the nation’s secure possession of Canaan, a possession which is theologically though not epistemologically prior to the possession of parcels of land by families.

**17:9-14**. Written into the pact there is indeed an obligation that Abraham has to fulfill, as there was not in Gen 9 or in Gen 15. Verses 10-14 resemble the form of collections of rules in Exodus or Leviticus and may have an origin of the same kind.[[345]](#footnote-345)

The obligation is the circumcising of the males within the community (v. 10). Circumcision *is* the pact (by synecdoche[[346]](#footnote-346)—that is, it is the sign of the pact). It denotes the cutting off of the skin that extends forward beyond the end of the penis. Its removal as a ceremonial and/or religious act is known among many peoples; it is also commonly claimed to be medically beneficial. God is taking a practice known in many cultures and giving it a new significance in connection with the pact between himself and his people, as he does with (e.g.) sacrifice and cleansing rituals. Whereas “you” was singular in v. 9, now it is plural; the obligation rests on the community as a whole, on the mothers and grandmothers as well as the fathers and grandfathers (cf. Exod 4:24-26!). Although it is administered only to the males, Israel did not draw the inference that the pact did not apply to females. “Was Sarah part of the covenant?” But her role as childbearer is not ancillary but essential to the covenant.[[347]](#footnote-347) (There is no evidence of female circumcision as a religious practice in the ancient world, nor of its being medically beneficial.)

So circumcision will function as the sign of the pact (v. 11). “Circumcision was God’s brand.”[[348]](#footnote-348) The rainbow was to be put in place by God as a sign for him but also secondarily as a sign for human beings. Circumcision was to be undertaken by human beings as a sign for them but also secondarily as a sign for God. God does not identify how it works as a sign, but if we ask whether it is a sign with an intrinsic relationship to what it signifies, like the rainbow, then the context of the sign is suggestive. The pact puts most emphasis on fruitfulness[[349]](#footnote-349) but it also incorporates the gift of the country of Canaan. Circumcision could symbolize the consecration of the men’s means of being fruitful and of their means of engaging in the sexual waywardness of which the Canaanites were believed to be guilty.[[350]](#footnote-350)

It is babies who are to be circumcised (vv. 12-13). Cultures vary over whether there is a particular age for the ceremony; God lays down one. The eighth-day rule means that it comes at the end of a mother’s initial seven-day taboo period following birth (Lev 12:1-3). The requirement of circumcision applies as much to people in the family who do not belong to Abraham’s own offspring as to those who do. In Israel, at least, some servants (most servants?) would be fellow-Israelites (e.g., Deut 15:12-18), but some would not be, and to make sure that no gray areas remain, Genesis mentions two categories of foreign servants—people born of foreigners within the family (Ishmael would have counted if his father had been another Egyptian) and foreigners who themselves come into the family from outside. In both cases they count as members of the family and they are therefore circumcised. They are beneficiaries of the pact God has made and they are under obligation to it.

What if someone neglects to be circumcised (v. 14)? Presumably God is talking about an adult who for some reason was not circumcised as a baby[[351]](#footnote-351) (cf. Exod 4:24-26), though wondering about this question is maybe again too prosaic—the point about the verse is to underscore further the integral link between circumcision and God’s pact. Someone who declines circumcision forfeits his place in his people. Maybe his relatives are expected to throw him out or maybe the verse is a warning that God will do so (again, see Exod 4:24-26; also Lev 20:3-6). “Be cut or be cut off.”[[352]](#footnote-352) The ambiguity over the cutting off again suggests that the point is not the sanction but the need to avoid ever incurring it.

**17:15-17.** Further revelations follow. Abraham is not the only person to have a new name. As with Abraham, it is the actual move from Śāray to Śārāh that is significant, rather than a meaning attaching to the names; likely both mean “queen,” but Genesis does not refer to the fact. Giving Sarai a new name would also point to her being within this new pact, even if she does not receive the physical sign of it.

The promise of blessing follows (v. 16), another note taken up from 1:28 and 12:2. It is not surprising to find it spelled out in terms of the gift of a son—yet it is surprising, because we thought that the question of a son for Abraham and Sarah had been resolved in Gen 16. The nations and kings of which vv. 5-6 spoke are to be directly her descendants, not merely indirectly so.

Pardonably, to Abraham (v. 17) the idea that Sarah might yet have a baby seems simply implausible. They had been trying for all those years and she is ninety (45 or 50 in our terms?). Again Abraham falls on his face in awe, as in v. 3. The gravity of that bodily response might suggest that his laugh, the first laugh in the Scriptures, is not a laugh of derision, but a laugh of wonder like Sarah’s laugh in Gen 21 when the boy is born. His questions, then, express amazement, not doubt. They are not so different from the questions in Gen 15. Yet perhaps here is a difference when “laughter and the internal dialogue have displaced groveling as a response to divine presence.”[[353]](#footnote-353)

**17:18-22.** What about Ishmael? Unlike a Western reader, Abraham does not ask for the reasons for God’s action. He just says “If only….” (*lû*).“If only” usually applies to the past; this “if only” is the only one in the Scriptures addressed to God and relating to the future. It is a kind of prayer, then, and Abraham is someone who knows how to pray; he will do so quite productively in Gen 18. “Living before you” suggests enjoying life somewhere where “you” are looking and smiling and providing. In v. 1 God had said, “Walk about before me”; Abraham asks that something of this kind such apply to Ishmael.

God reacts to Abraham’s plea (v. 19) first with a restatement of the intention he announced in v. 16. He does not tell Abraham why he proposes to operate in the way he does. Perhaps we are to infer that he had never accepted Sarah’s way of seeking to make sure that his promise found fulfillment and that he insists on using his own way, even though Gen 12—14 has told us stories of where he was prepared to work via human initiatives. But he does not say. Instead he both expands on what he said before and indicates further that his mind is made up, by telling Abraham what his son’s name is to be. Actually it seems that Abraham has suggested the boy’s name for him. “Laughed” in v. 17 was *yiṣḥāq*; exactly that word will be the boy’s name. In itself (without the *waw* consecutive) its implication would be “May he laugh.” The name does not make explicit the identity of the “he” (like the name Ishmael, “God listens”), and it could designate the boy as one who laughs (compare the explanation of the name Jacob), but in origin it would likely refer to God (like the name Joseph). The name speaks of God’s smiling on Isaac, of “the laugh, the promise and the miracle that made his birth possible.”[[354]](#footnote-354) That smile is expressed in his making a pact *with* Isaac and *for* his offspring.[[355]](#footnote-355)

It’s not that God was not listening to Abraham (v. 20); there follows some response to his plea. Again God works with the significance of a name. God says, “As for ‘God listens,’ I’ve listened.”[[356]](#footnote-356) He is not merely referring back to the listening in 16:11. He has now listened to Abraham, and new promises for Ishmael issue as a result. Ishmael too is to be the beneficiary of a promise about blessing and fruitfulness and abundant numerousness. God makes the promise the more certain by speaking as if it has already happened, because he has said it, and therefore in effect it has indeed happened. While the people listening to the story know that Isaac will generate twelve leaders among his grandchildren, here God promises that Ishmael will do so, too—a generation earlier in the story (25:12-18). He will be a big nation, as God promised Abraham (cf. 12:2). God’s choosing one does not mean rejecting the other.[[357]](#footnote-357)

But God goes on to reaffirm that the reworked pact that he has been talking about (v. 21) will indeed belong to Isaac. Maybe Abraham will eventually get it. In restating his intention once more, God again leaves himself with little wiggle room. Sarah will conceive in three months’ time. Isaac will be born at this “set time” (*mô‘ēd*)next year. How neat if it turns out that the appearance and the birth both happen at a “set time” such as first fruits (*Jub* 15 expands on this possibility)!

With that, God is done (v. 22). He goes. It was a real appearing; it’s a real departure.

**17:23-27.** So Abraham sets about his macabre task; Genesis “reports it in detail (still without becoming graphic),”[[358]](#footnote-358) just to assure us that Abraham did as he was told, like Noah. As there were presumably at least 318 of the grown men alone, one would like to think he had some help, and/or it was hardly a task accomplished in one day (and see 34:24-25). But the phrase “on this very day” (e.g., 7:13; Exod 12:17; Deut 32:48; Josh 5:11) draws attention to the importance of this epoch-making moment. Abraham is doing his part in putting into effect this new version of God’s pact with him. If there was any doubt about the significance of his laughter in v. 17, there is no doubt about his obedience.[[359]](#footnote-359) Apparently Ishmael is one of the people who benefit from and are responsible to the pact, even though it will be made with Isaac. There is some tension between the latter declaration and Genesis’s noting three times that Ishmael was circumcised. Ishmael is thus not “specifically excluded from the covenant line.”[[360]](#footnote-360) The tension can be resolved by assuming that vv. 15-22 are “clumsy additions” by someone who was a bit stupid.[[361]](#footnote-361) But in the text as we have it, the implication is that even as circumcision becomes *the* marker of God’s pact with Israel, it is not exclusive. Its application to Ishmael might remind the audience that Abraham is to be the ancestor of nations.[[362]](#footnote-362) Whereas Western readers might be concerned that the servants were having an unpleasant operation imposed on them,[[363]](#footnote-363) for Genesis the repeated reference to servants carries the implication that they are not to be left out. Circumcision is a democratic rite. It “allows for a genuine openness to the outsider.”[[364]](#footnote-364)

There seems no reason to question the Arab peoples’ tradition that their ancestry goes back to Ishmael. They are thus the beneficiaries of God’s promise regarding Ishmael.

## Circumcision

When Abraham and his offspring are required to be circumcised as an expression of their commitment to God and his pact with them, it “does not make the covenant bilateral,”[[365]](#footnote-365) even though the sign does become integral to the covenant. The status of circumcision is similar to that of baptism. When baptism becomes a sign of belonging to Jesus as God again expresses his freedom to rework the terms of his pact and cancels the circumcision requirement, baptism becomes an obligation tied up with God’s welcoming people into the Jesus family, though not exactly a condition of it.

Some Jews who came to trust in Jesus believed that both Jews and Gentile believers in Jesus were required to be circumcised (e.g., Acts 15:1). In that situation, at least, this insistence compromised the principle that the gospel issued from God’s grace.[[366]](#footnote-366) Circumcision was not part of the relationship between God and Abraham at the beginning and it need not continue to be part of the relationship between God and Abraham’s offspring. Abraham received the seal of circumcision after his relationship with God was established on the basis of his trust in God’s promise (Rom 4:9-11). Paul opposes the idea that people who come to believe in Jesus need to be circumcised. “Neither Circumcision under the Law, nor Baptisme under the Gospell, [is] absolutely necessary.”[[367]](#footnote-367) Yet both are required by the covenant.

The snag with abandoning circumcision lies in losing what the sign symbolized. In general terms, it reflects God expecting that a commitment from his people should be expressed in what they do with their bodies and not merely in what they do with their inner beings. When people come to identify with Jesus’s dying for them, they still share in disavowing the fleshly body as he did when he was circumcised (Col 2:11). But “the future of the covenant in Christ is a future in the body” (e.g., Rom 6:19; Gal 6:17).[[368]](#footnote-368) As long as people do not require circumcision as a condition of belonging to the people of God, then, there is a case for continuing to observe the rite (cf. Acts 16:3; Gal 2:3). And specifically, people’s commitment needs to express itself in their sex lives. For a man, circumcision points to the disciplining of the means of sexual expression. Perhaps it was appropriate that “the promulgator of the eternal law requires the mark of carnal circumcision only in males, because in the sexual relationship the man is more impetuous than the woman,”[[369]](#footnote-369) though in the modern West women may feel less constrained in their sexual relationships than was traditionally so.[[370]](#footnote-370)

It was always the case that “circumcision functions in the flesh but not according to the flesh”[[371]](#footnote-371)—that is, it was never limited to people who belong to the offspring of Abraham, nor to masters as opposed to servants, as Gen 17 makes explicit. Circumcision would be a mark of distinctiveness for the community, a concrete, intentional, and costly sign, and one that embraced both “born” and “bought.”[[372]](#footnote-372) It went along with a new name. Both suggested a new and climactic stage in the differentiation of Abraham from his environment.[[373]](#footnote-373)

Baptism corresponds to circumcision, then, in being open to all peoples and to both servants and masters. It may or may not contrast with circumcision according to whether or not it works by families (Reformed theology argues that it does). It does contrast with circumcision in being open to both sexes—it thus avoids the oddness of the fact that the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenant was open to both sexes though the covenant sign was not: cf. the implicit contrast between baptism and circumcision (at least as understood in Galatia) in Gal 3:28 as making no distinction on the basis of ethnicity, class, or gender.[[374]](#footnote-374)

With circumcision and with baptism, it is no use accepting the sign if you do not also manifest the reality it signifies, the integrity of walk before God with which Gen 17 begins. Genesis presupposes the expectation which the First Testament will later make explicit, that Israel needs to have its mind as well as its body circumcised (e.g., Deut 10:16). It would be odd to think of an inner circumcision if there was no outer circumcision; it would be odd to think of an outer circumcision if there was no inner circumcision. The parallel with baptism continues to hold. It would be odd to think of an inner cleansing and dying if there was no outward sign of dying and of cleansing; it would also be odd to think of an outward baptism if there was no dying and cleansing of the whole person. Baptism can also be an empty ritual. It can take on a life of its own which has no relation to its being a sign of God’s commitment to us and ours to God. The need to avoid this possibility is one of the ways in which circumcision helps us understand baptism (Col 2:11-13).[[375]](#footnote-375)

# Genesis 18:1—19:38—The Three Visitors

## Overview

Gen 13:10-13 prepared us for an account of a catastrophe in Sodom, and it raised the question how this catastrophe would affect Lot, while Gen 17 told of God’s promise concerning a son for Sarah but didn’t indicate how Sarah would come to know about it. Gen 18—19 fills in these two gaps. First there is another appearance to Abraham which incorporates the announcement to Sarah and a chance for her to laugh. In due course there is an account of the disaster that comes to Sodom and the rescue of Lot and his family. Within this main story is an account of a dialogue between Yahweh and Abraham about the propriety of bringing catastrophe. And appended to the main story is a postscript about Lot and his daughters. The chapters give no indication that the events in these chapters followed on the events in Gen 17 and it makes more sense to see this account as parallel to Gen 17.[[376]](#footnote-376) The repetition of the story about the giving of the promise underlines its importance.[[377]](#footnote-377)

One question underlying the chapter is, was Yahweh fair to Sodom? And the answer might be:

1. Yahweh’s primary commitment is to Abraham and Sarah, whether or not they deserve it.
2. Tied up with that commitment is an intention that Abraham should be the means whereby blessing comes to the world.
3. Abraham’s dialogue presses Yahweh on when he would be merciful to a town such as Sodom.
4. The envoys’ mission is designed to check whether it is fair to bring disaster—and it sure does so.
5. The postscript shows what happens to some people who get too close to Sodom

## Translation

18:1So Yahweh appeared to him[[378]](#footnote-378) by the Mamre Oaks, when he was sitting at the tent entrance as the day grew hot.

2He lifted his eyes and saw, and there, three men were standing near him. He saw them and ran to meet them from the tent entrance, bowed to the ground, 3and said, “My lords,[[379]](#footnote-379) please, if I’ve found favor in your eyes, don’t pass by your servant, please. 4May a little water please be got? Bathe your feet. Rest under the tree. 5I’ll get a bit of bread. Sustain your heart, you can pass on after, because of the fact that you’ve passed near your servant.” They said, “Yes, you may do as you’ve spoken.”

6Abraham hurried to the tent to Sarah and said, “Hurry, three measures[[380]](#footnote-380) of fine flour (meal), knead it, make loaves.” 7Out to the herd Abraham ran, got a nice, tender calf, and gave it to the boy,[[381]](#footnote-381) and he hurried to prepare it. 8He got yoghurt and milk and the calf that he’d prepared and set it before them, and while he stood near them under the tree, they ate.

9They said to him, “Where’s Sarah your wife?” He said, “There, in the tent.” 10He said, “I will definitely come back to you at the time when there is life,[[382]](#footnote-382) and there, Sarah your wife will have a son.” Sarah was listening at the tent entrance; it was behind him. 11Now Abraham and Sarah were old, going on in years; the way woman menstruate had left off from happening for Sarah. 12So Sarah laughed inside, saying “After I’m withered, there will have been[[383]](#footnote-383) lushness[[384]](#footnote-384) for me, with my lord[[385]](#footnote-385) old!”

13Yahweh said to Abraham, “Why is it that Sarah laughed, saying ‘Will I really give birth, in that[[386]](#footnote-386) I’m old?’ 14Is a thing too extraordinary for Yahweh? At this set time I will come back to you, at the time when there is life, and Sarah will have a son.” 15Sarah lied, saying “I didn’t laugh,” because she was afraid. He said, “No, you did laugh.”

16From there the men set off, and they looked down at Sedom, with Abraham going with them to send them off.

17But Yahweh[[387]](#footnote-387)—he said, “Am I going to hide from Abraham what I’m going to do, 18when Abraham is indeed to become a big, numerous nation, and all the nations on the earth are to gain blessing[[388]](#footnote-388) by him?— 19because I’ve acknowledged him in order that[[389]](#footnote-389) he may order his children and his household after him and they will keep Yahweh’s way by practising faithfulness in the exercise of authority, in order that Yahweh may bring about for Abraham what he’s spoken concerning him.”

20So Yahweh said, “The outcry against Sedom and Amorah,[[390]](#footnote-390) because it’s big, and their wrongdoing, because it’s very grave:[[391]](#footnote-391) 21I must go down and see whether they have brought about complete ruin,[[392]](#footnote-392) in keeping with the outcry against it[[393]](#footnote-393) that has come to me. If not, I must acknowledge it.”

22The men turned their face from there and went to Sedom, while Abraham was still standing before Yahweh.[[394]](#footnote-394) 23Abraham came up and said, “Will you really sweep away the faithful person with the faithless person? 24Maybe there are fifty faithful people within the town. Will you really sweep it away and not bear with[[395]](#footnote-395) the place for the sake of the fifty faithful people within it? 25A desecration for you,[[396]](#footnote-396) to do a thing like this, putting to death the faithful with the faithless, so the faithful and the faithless are the same. A desecration for you! Isn’t the one who exercises authority over the entire earth to exercise authority?”[[397]](#footnote-397) 26Yahweh said, “If I find in Sedom fifty faithful people within the town, I will bear with the entire place on account of them.”

27Abraham averred:[[398]](#footnote-398) “There, please: I’ve resolved to speak to my Lord, when I’m dirt and ash.[[399]](#footnote-399) 28Maybe the fifty faithful will be five short. Will you devastate the entire town because of five?” He said, “I won’t devastate it if I find there forty-five.”

29He spoke yet again to him: “Maybe forty will be found there?” He said, “I won’t act, on account of the forty.” 30He said, “May it please not enrage my Lord, and I will speak. Maybe thirty will be found there.” He said, “I won’t act if I find there thirty.” 31He said, “There, please: I’ve resolved to speak with my Lord. Maybe twenty will be found there.” He said, “I won’t devastate it on account of the twenty.” 32He said, “May it please not enrage my Lord, and I will speak one last time. Maybe ten will be found there.” He said, “I won’t devastate it on account of the ten.”

33Yahweh went when he had finished speaking to Abraham, and Abraham went back to his place.

19:1The two envoys came to Sedom in the evening, and Lot was sitting at the gateway of Sedom. Lot saw them, and got up to meet them. He bowed low, his face to the ground. 2He said, “Here, my lords, please do turn aside to your servant’s house so you can stay the night and bathe your feet. Then you can start early and go on your way.” They said, “No, because we can stay the night in the square.” 3But he pressed them hard, so they turned aside to him and came into his house. He made a banquet for them and baked flat bread, and they ate.

4Before they could go to bed, the townspeople, the Sedomites, surrounded the house, from young right to old, the entire people, from every part. 5They called to Lot and said to him, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out so we can sleep with them.”[[400]](#footnote-400) 6Lot went out to them at the entrance, though he shut the door behind him. 7He said, “My brothers, don’t act badly, please. 8So, please: I have two daughters who haven’t slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you and you can do to them whatever is good in your eyes. Only don’t do anything to these men, because of the fact that they’ve come under the shelter of my roof-beam.”

9But they said, “Come up here.”[[401]](#footnote-401) They said, ‘The man came to reside as an alien, and he’s actually exercising authority.[[402]](#footnote-402) Now we’ll act badly with you, worse than with them.” They pressed hard against the man (against Lot) and came up to break the door. 10But the men put out their hand and got Lot to come to them, into the house, and they shut the door. 11As for the people who were at the entrance of the house, they struck them down with a daze, from young right to old, so they became weary of trying to find the entrance.

12The men said to Lot, “Who else do you have here—son-in-law, your sons, your daughters, anyone who belongs to you in the town? Take them out of the place. 13Because we’re going to devastate this place, because the outcry before Yahweh against them[[403]](#footnote-403) has become so big that Yahweh has sent us to devastate it.” 14So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who had got[[404]](#footnote-404) his daughters, and said “Set off, get out of this place, because Yahweh is going to devastate the town.” But in the eyes of his sons-in-law he was like someone making people laugh.

15As dawn came, the envoys pressed Lot, saying “Set off, get your wife and your two daughters who are to be found here, so you’re not swept away because of the town’s waywardness.” 16He delayed, so the men took firm hold of his hand, his wife’s hand, and his two daughters’ hand, by Yahweh’s pity on him, got him out, and set him down outside the town.

17When they had got them outside, one said, “Escape for your life, don’t gaze behind you, don’t halt anywhere in the area around. Escape to the highland, so you’re not swept away.” 18Lot said to them, “No, please, my lords![[405]](#footnote-405) 19There, please: your servant has found favor in your eyes and you’ve acted in such big commitment with me in preserving my life. But I – I can’t flee to the highland so that the bad event doesn’t attach itself to me and I die. 20Here, please – this town’s near for fleeing to, and it’s small. I can flee there, it’s small, so my life can be preserved.” 21He said to him, “Here, I’m accepting you[[406]](#footnote-406) in this thing too, in not overthrowing the town that you spoke of. 22Hurry up and escape there, because I can’t do anything till you come there.” (That’s why people named[[407]](#footnote-407) the town Ṣo’ar.)

23As the sun came out on the earth and Lot arrived at Ṣo’ar, 24Yahweh rained on Sedom and Amorah burning sulfur from Yahweh, from the heavens. 25He overthrew these towns and the entire area around and all the people living in the towns and what grew in the ground.

26But his wife gazed behind him and became a salt pilaster.

27Abraham started early in the morning for the place where he had stood before Yahweh 28and looked out over the face of Sedom and Amorah and over the entire face of the land in the area. He saw, and there, vapor from the land went up like the vapor from a kiln.

29So it was that when God devastated the towns of the area, God was mindful of Abraham and sent Lot out from the middle of the overthrow, when he overthrew the towns in which Lot lived.

30Lot went up from Ṣo’ar and lived in the highland, his two daughters with him, because he was afraid to live in Ṣo’ar. He lived in a certain cave,[[408]](#footnote-408) he and his two daughters. 31The firstborn said to the younger one, ‘Our father is old and there’s no one in the world[[409]](#footnote-409) to be with us[[410]](#footnote-410) in the way of the entire world. 32Come on, let’s get our father to drink wine so we can sleep with him and get offspring alive through our father.” 33So they got their father to drink wine that night, and the firstborn went in and slept with her father. He didn’t know when she lay down or when she got up. 34Next day the firstborn said to the younger one, “There, I slept with my father last night. Let’s get him to drink wine tonight as well, and you come and sleep with him, so we can get offspring alive through our father.” 35So they got their father to drink wine that night as well, and the younger one got up and slept with him. He didn’t know when she lay down or when she got up.

36So Lot’s two daughters got pregnant through their father. 37The firstborn gave birth to a son and named him Mo’ab. He’s the ancestor of Mo’ab until today. 38The younger one also gave birth to a son, and named him Ben-ammi. He’s the ancestor of the Ammonites until today.

## Interpretation

Gen 18:1—19:38 is a long and complex unit relating a sequence of events taking place over almost twenty-four hours.[[411]](#footnote-411) In MT it forms one paragraph within the unit running from 18:1—21:21; one may guess that the medieval division into two chapters is made for convenience. It outlines as follows:

18:1a Introduction

18:1b-15 Lunchtime: three human-like figures appear at Abraham’s encampment, he shows them hospitality, and they promise that Sarah will have a son.

18:16 The “men” start to set off for Sodom

18:17-21 Yahweh reflects on the action they are about to undertake and tells Abraham about it

18:22 The “men” (or two of them) go to Sodom

18:23-38 Abraham challenges Yahweh about the action

18:39 Yahweh withdraws from Abraham

19:1-14 Evening: the two men, now termed “envoys,” meet Lot in Sodom and urge him to leave before a catastrophe arrives

19:15-22 Dawn: they hurry Lot out of Sodom

19:23-26 Sunrise: Lot reaches Zo’ar and the catastrophe duly arrives

19:27-28 That same morning: Abraham looks out at what has happened

19:29 Closing summary

19:30-38 Coda about Lot and his daughters

While the unit thus tells a complete story taking place over a day, it is not entirely self-contained:

1. It fills out the trailer in 13:10-13.
2. Its opening refers to Abraham simply as “him” (18:1) and 18:1-15 suggests seeing it as another version of the giving of a promise about Sarah having a baby which was one of the themes in Gen 17 (here is no suggestion in Gen 18 that God has already given the promise and that this is a repetition).
3. Whereas the announcement to Hagar about her son (Gen 16) leads into the account of his being born, the fulfillment does not follow here—it has to wait until Gen 21.
4. The exchange about Sarah’s laughter (18:13-15) ends in a dramatic way, but also not in a way that suggests closure—which will also come in Gen 21.

In Gen 8—9 Yahweh promised never again to bring a deluge. Gen 18—19 implies that he may well bring other smaller-scale catastrophes. The story thus raises the question, “How can we speak of divine judgment in the world?”[[412]](#footnote-412) One answer the Scriptures suggest is, by valuing the reassurance that the victims of persecution and oppression in the world will meet their judgment (e.g., 2 Peter 2:6-8). While the chapters incidentally provide some explanation for the apparently devastated state of Sodom and give an account of the origins of the Ammonites and Moabites, they also offer a warning to Israel about what happens to an Israelite town if it behaves like Sodom and Gomorrah (cf. Isa 1:9-10; Ezek 16; Amos 4:11). The people of God has to see itself as Sodom and as thus in danger of Sodom’s fate. Jesus in effect makes the same point (Matt 10:15; 11:20-24). So the story drives the church to respond to it “by making sure we speak of it as a warning to the church as the object of God’s judgment.”[[413]](#footnote-413)

In episode one (18:1-16) visitors arrive at Abraham’s encampment, he makes a feast for them, and they announce that Sarah will have a baby. This first episode in the unit makes sense in itself, though like the unit as a whole, it is only semi-complete. It presupposes that we know who “he” is, and at the end it does not tell us why the “men” are going to Sodom—or exactly how the story links with 13:10-13. In addition, the point of the account of the feast is not clear. Is it simply a raising of suspense for 18:9-15?[[414]](#footnote-414) The feast does not relate closely to the bringing of the promise to Sarah and to the tension caused by her laugh. Further, there is some unclarity about how many visitors there are and about their identity. While one might ask whether this unclarity indicates that more than one version of the story has been combined, it may rather be a sign of sophistication in storytelling, an indication of awareness that some subtlety is required in talking about visits by God and by his envoys who appear in human form, and about the way the recipients of these visits understand what is going on.

In 18:17-33 Yahweh speaks (to himself?) about the need to tell Abraham what is going on (vv. 17-19) and speaks (to Abraham?) about what he intends. As (two of) the visitors go off to Sodom, Abraham engages Yahweh in a dialogue about whether he will sweep the town away if there are some faithful people there. Dramatically, the divine speeches and the dialogue bridge the time when the visitors are on their way to Sodom. They also provide the theological background to what will happen there. The language of Yahweh’s statements and of the dialogue is more conceptual and the talk about faithfulness and the exercise of authority matches the language of the prophets, the Psalms, and the wisdom books. It constitutes an anticipatory reflection on the events related in Gen 19 rather than having anything to do with 18:1-15.[[415]](#footnote-415) If the statements and the dialogue raise more sophisticated questions than the stories do, they are not thereby shown to be a later reflection on the story. Theological simplicity and sophistication coexist in the United States in the twenty-first century and there is no reason to suppose that they did not coexist in Judah. Similar issues to the ones raised in 18:17-33 are raised in different periods, in Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Job. So 18:17-33 might be a reflection on an earlier story which occupies the bulk of Gen 18—19, and while the story as a whole is traditionally assumed to come from J, 18:17-33 is often seen as a later addition to the main story line.[[416]](#footnote-416) But there is no strong evidence in this direction.

In the third episode (19:1-29) the visitors arrive at Sodom, and Lot makes a feast for them. The comparison and contrast with Abraham’s feast now explain the significance similar features in the first episode in the story. The three visitors had two tasks: “one is to promise a beginning…. The other is to effect an ending.”[[417]](#footnote-417) The story as a whole is more about Sodom and Lot than about Abraham, and the feast in the first scene is backdrop to this one. After Lot’s banquet, things go wrong in a way that answers the questions raised by 18:20-21 and by the dialogue: it is clear that the entire community is involved in faithlessness. There is no suggestion that Lot and his family count as “faithful.”[[418]](#footnote-418) Lot starts that way, but subsequent events raises questions about the designation. The reasons for his rescue are Yahweh’s pity (v. 16), the envoys’ grace and commitment (v. 19), and Yahweh’s mindfulness of Abraham (v. 29). Lot’s dealings with the Sodomites make his person stand in contrast with Abraham. Abraham is a hero; Lot is a buffoon and a failure,[[419]](#footnote-419) “not so much the antithesis of Abraham as a pale and failed imitation.”[[420]](#footnote-420) His sons-in-law laugh in a different way from Sarah. The visitors bring a message to Lot as they brought one to Abraham, a message which does not get heeded by Lot’s wife as their earlier message received an equivocal response from Abraham’s wife. Their message takes up the terms “outcry” and “devastation” from Yahweh’s speeches and the dialogue. The talk of devastation also recalls the deluge story, which, indeed, Gen 19 compares and contrasts.[[421]](#footnote-421) Both stories tell of an overwhelming catastrophe that constitutes punishment for human waywardness, though one is universal and the other local, and the characters of Noah and Lot contrast. Verse 29 closes off 18:1—19:29 in terms that recall the deluge story.

The coda (19:30-38) relates how Lot’s life falls further apart: he abandons Zo’ar, he takes refuge in a cave, and his daughters rape him in order to open up a future for them. The coda makes for a snide comparison with Noah in his drunkenness and the consequences. It also contrasts the future of Lot’s line with the future of Abraham’s line of which Gen 18 spoke.

**18:1.** Genesis again reports how Yahweh appears to Abraham (cf. 12:7; 17:1)—for the last time, in so many words. Abraham is not named, which enhances the continuity from Gen 17. The scene is the place where Abraham settled at 13:8 and where he has presumably been living ever since. Thus the story also picks up from when he and Lot parted and Lot went to live near Sodom, that town of wrongdoers that was destined for eventual devastation. Abraham has perhaps been out in the early morning checking that his staff are properly about their jobs with the sheep and cattle, and later in the afternoon he may be out and about again, but in the middle of the day everyone would relax. On the other hand, TgNeoph and TgPsJ have the story picking up from 17:23-27 in picturing Abraham as recovering from circumcising himself, and Rashi thus sees God as engaged in sick visiting.[[422]](#footnote-422)

**18:2-8.** What is then odd is that the declaration that Yahweh appeared to Abraham is not immediately followed by a message from Yahweh (contrast 12:7; 17:1).[[423]](#footnote-423) The arrival of three travelers at “the hottest (and drowsiest) time of the day”[[424]](#footnote-424) is surprising. One might expect them to be resting—though the heat does not usually get oppressive along the mountain ridge where Mamre sits. They apparently appear suddenly, a little startlingly, as supernatural figures do.[[425]](#footnote-425) But “appeared” was an odd word, because Yahweh is concealed. He is “in disguise.”[[426]](#footnote-426) The chapter moves from telling the story from the narrator’s perspective in v. 1 to telling it from Abraham’s perspective. Although the narrator has told us that Yahweh is appearing to Abraham, Yahweh does not make it obvious to him. There is no “I am Yahweh” or “I am El Shadday” or “I am your shield.” All Abraham sees is three “men”: the narrative’s “there” invites us to watch their arrival with him. He is about to show hospitality to angels without knowing it (Heb 13:2).[[427]](#footnote-427) Why are there three of them, TgNeoph and TgPsJ ask?—one to give the message about Sarah having a baby, one to rescue Lot, one to bring the disaster on Sodom (*b. Baba Metzia* 86 identifies them as Michael, Raphael, and Gabriel).[[428]](#footnote-428) It fits much of the presentation if they are Yahweh and two envoys.[[429]](#footnote-429) But through the two chapters there is no absolute consistency or consistent development in the presentation (God and/or men and/or angels?), which gives a true impression of an ambiguity inherent in the experience and the event. Abraham’s initial look is the casual glance of someone half asleep, but it soon has him wide awake; the old man leaps to his feet, then bows to the ground. The three figures are not giving the impression that they are just passing and are on their way (contrast Luke 24:28). They have deliberately stopped and they are hanging about waiting, like Abraham’s servant at the well (Gen 24:13).

Abraham knows his duty in the circumstances (vv. 3-5). There are no truck stops along this mountain crest. While travelers would not expect free food from settlements they passed, they might expect to be given water and to be able to barter for food. Abraham’s words to them may be conventional, but the verses that follow will show that they are not just words (though one does wonder if he treated every passerby this way, or whether there was evidently something special about these three).[[430]](#footnote-430)

Even to a non-Western reader the account that follows (vv. 6-8) will surely seem amusing. The impression one gets is not of the patriarch of a large clan but of a man and his wife with their single “boy.” It is of course the man’s job to fire up the grill and the woman’s to care for the other things. So the ninety-nine-year-old is scurrying here and running there and hurrying his eighty-nine-year-old wife to get making a vast amount of bread, while he himself is hastening to kill, prepare, and roast a calf (which I am advised would take some eight hours), along with the appropriate side dishes. Perhaps one is rather to imagine him butchering some steaks and grilling or boiling them before he presents them to his guests, though the word order in v. 7a already implies that his action will take more than a few minutes, as will Sarah’s.[[431]](#footnote-431) He leaves the guests to eat, standing a little way away like a server; the host would give the guests the best and stand back himself. It is just as well that the three “men” were not simply passers-by but people who had come especially to see Sarah and Abraham: eating meat would not be an everyday event, and Abraham’s hospitality is the most over-the-top version imaginable. The hospitality theme will turn out to be important in the story as a whole, as will its over-the-top nature. It would surely be hard to know when to kill the fatted calf so as to make a banquet for three passersby, as it is difficult to know whether to give to everyone who asks (Luke 6:30). But “if we are deceived now and then, well and good.”[[432]](#footnote-432) Another consideration in the telling of the story is that the feast fits some of the regulations for sacrifice; Abraham “is behaving more wisely than he realized.”[[433]](#footnote-433)

**18:9-12.** The audience might be wondering why the narrator said that Yahweh is appearing. What is the point of the appearance? The visitors now come to their business. They know Abraham’s wife’s name. Is it the kind of knowledge that puts Abraham on the track of their being more than three passing strangers? Are they prophets?[[434]](#footnote-434) Why then do they ask about her whereabouts? Do they want to make sure she is within earshot? The head of a family like Abraham sits outside his tent as the front of the family’s relating to the outside world. A woman like Sarah sits inside relating to that world and keeping out of the meeting of men.

The transition to “I” (v. 10) marks an explicit beginning of the process whereby it becomes clear to Abraham that they are not simply three co-equal men. One of them is senior to the others, speaks of himself over against them, and makes an extraordinary declaration. But he doesn’t speak in terms of making something happen (namely, causing Sarah to have a baby) and thus indicate that he is God; his speech could again be that of a prophet. He speaks of coming back “when there is life,” which v. 14 will confirm is the same as the “set time” of 17:21, and thus sounds like the time when Sarah will give birth; he does not speak of coming to cause her to conceive as she will need to do in a few weeks’ time if the baby is to be born in a year’s time (actually there will be no reference to his coming back in either connection: is one to think of him as the one who makes the birth happen behind the scenes?). It is these words that suggest we see this giving of this promise as an alternative version of the one in Gen 17. Here as there, the promise is given to Abraham, but here Sarah is within earshot, only just inside the tent.

The statement that Sarah was beyond menopause (vv. 11-12) might seem an understatement, but we have noted that in our terms we might see her as middle-aged. Whereas Abraham laughed earlier (17:12), here Sarah laughs. “Humour is the opposite of all self-admiration and self-praise,”[[435]](#footnote-435) and the laugh might be her expression of wonder (cf. TgNeoph, TgPsJ; also Heb 11:11), though she becomes embarrassed about it. She describes herself as if she is a worn out garment or someone who is all wrinkly (e.g., Lam 3:4). Age has done its ravaging on her body, on the outside and in the shriveling of her womb. Her exclamation is in effect a question expressing astonishment at the idea that she is going to be fertile, with her husband surely being past it, too.

**18:13-15**. We remain unclear how far Abraham understands what is going on; the narrator tells us Yahweh is speaking, but he refers to himself in the third person, so it need not be clear to Abraham. Although Sarah had only laughed inside, the “man” has prophetic insight; he knows about her laugh. Yahweh may imply that Sarah’s laugh was a laugh of unbelief rather than of amazement. But it won’t make any difference. Yahweh’s action is not dependent on Sarah’s faith, partly because he’s not acting for her and Abraham’s sake, anyway.

In a sense she would not even be entitled to a laugh of amazement (v. 14). Describing something as “extraordinary” need not imply it is miraculous in the sense of requiring God’s action (see e.g., 2 Sam 1:26), but more often than not things that are “extraordinary” are God’s acts (e.g., Ps 29:7). So by definition the answer to the question is “No.” “Israel stands before God’s word of promise but characteristically finds that word beyond reason and belief…. If the question of the Lord is answered, ‘Yes, some things are too hard, impossible for God,’ then God is not yet confessed as God. We have not yet conceded radical freedom to God.” But fortunately “the resolve of God to open a future by a new heir does not depend on the readiness of Abraham and Sarah to accept it. God keeps his own counsel and will work his own will.”[[436]](#footnote-436)

Sarah feels rebuked (v. 15). Evidently she, at least, has no idea who she is talking with. But she had only laughed inside, so it wasn’t a big lie. And this exchange, with the two further references to laughing, reminds the audience of the name of the child who will be born and of the more unequivocal laughter that will come to Sarah then (21:6). And/or it leaves the audience with a sense that we haven’t yet reached the end of the discussion of laughter that comes to a halt here.[[437]](#footnote-437)

**18:16-19**. The visitors have completed the first stage of their mission. They are now off to stage two. From a point not far away from Mamre it would be possible to look down towards the Dead Sea and Sodom as Abraham and Lot had looked down, back in 13:5-18.

But as Abraham is setting them off (v. 17), Yahweh reflects to himself, or speaks to the other two, whom he would be used to consulting as members of the divine council (Jer 23:18).[[438]](#footnote-438) Either way, they will eventually proceed on their own (see v. 22, and 19:1). The principle behind Yahweh’s question finds further expression in Amos 3:7, but the rationale and the reference there are different. He reveals to prophets the action he intends to take so that they can tell people about them. Here he plans to tell Abraham about the investigation which he is about to undertake (vv. 20-21 imply he has not made up his mind about the action he intends in light of what he discovers).[[439]](#footnote-439) TgNeoph has him reflecting that Abraham is, after all, his friend (cf. Isa 41:8).

The rationale for telling Abraham about the investigation (v. 18) is also different, though Yahweh’s logic is expressed allusively. The rationale lies in his promise to Abraham, which he summarizes in words that virtually repeat 12:3 (“numerous” is an addition, and 12:3 had “kin-groups” rather than “nations”). Nations are to find blessing through Abraham, and to that end, Abraham needs to know the principles upon which Yahweh works with nations.

To that same end (v. 19) it is necessary that his household should be an embodiment of the priorities that Yahweh expects of humanity as a whole. Yahweh has “known” Abraham in the sense of taken notice of and paid regard to him. In effect he has chosen him. The same verb comes in this connection in Amos 3:2, but the use of the unusual verb links with the theme of Yahweh making a pact with Abraham (Gen 15 and 17). In the political world, two parties can talk about “acknowledging” one another in connection with the mutual recognition involved in a pact; in the religious world, Yahweh “acknowledges” his people and they “acknowledge” him.[[440]](#footnote-440) One object of singling out Abraham in that way is that he should give orders to his offspring and his “household”—here we revert to the picture of Abraham as the head of a sizeable group, though not of course yet of a vast number of children. Yahweh adds reference to generations to come. He’s not just going to make a difference in his lifetime. The difference he is to make is that following Yahweh’s instructions will mean his household will “keep Yahweh’s way.” That phrase can mean the unique way Yahweh acts, or the way Yahweh acts which people are to imitate, or the way Yahweh expects people to act—the latter two could be the same thing. Here it will denote one or other of them and in effect it will have the same meaning as living one’s life before Yahweh (17:1), with transparency and integrity. Yahweh goes on to define that way of life as doing *ṣᵉdāqāh ûmišpāṭ*, the classic hendiadys that runs through the Psalms and the Prophets. We know about *ṣᵉdāqāh* from 15:6 and of the root *šāpaṭ* from 16:6. In combination the two words suggest a commitment to faithful relationships before God and in the community which finds expression in the way one makes decisions. It is everything that the Torah, the Prophets, and the Psalms will expect by way of a life lived Yahweh’s way. It is a monumental expectation that Yahweh has of Abraham, that he should not only walk before him with integrity but should ensure that his entourage walks that way. Abraham must put his effort into this task if he expects Yahweh to fulfill his promises about him. It is because Abraham is so important to the fulfillment of Yahweh’s purpose for the world that Abraham needs to understand the principles on which Yahweh is working. Yahweh’s hopes are only partially fulfilled in Genesis.[[441]](#footnote-441)

**18:20-21.** If Yahweh was not speaking out loud in vv. 17-19, it seems likely that the new introduction “so Yahweh said” indicates that he is doing so now, since Abraham’s words will shortly presuppose that Abraham somehow knows Yahweh’s intentions. The references to an outcry (*zᵉ‘āqāh*/*ṣᵉ‘āqāh*) cohere with the reference to *ṣᵉdāqāh ûmišpāṭ* in v. 19. The classic pointer to the link is Isa 5:7. When there is an outcry on the part of people who are being robbed of their land or who have to watch people indulging themselves when they lack enough to eat or who are deprived of their rights when the elders are supposed to be resolving disputes in a fair way at the town gate, then the community has failed to exercise its responsibility for *ṣᵉdāqāh ûmišpāṭ*. TgPsJ gives as the reason for the outcry regarding Sodom and Gomorrah that “they oppress the poor and decree that whoever gives a morsel of bread to the needy will be burned by fire.” Yahweh has heard tell that within Sodom and Gomorrah and/or in its relationships with the people who live around the towns, there is huge wrongdoing of this kind. The blood of people who have been robbed of their lives one way or another has been crying out (Gen 4:10), and Yahweh has heard it. While Gen 19 will focus on sexual waywardness in Sodom (cf. Jude 7),[[442]](#footnote-442) elsewhere the First Testament sees Sodom as an embodiment of this broader social and moral failure (e.g., Isa 1:10-31; Ezek 16).

But Yahweh does not act on the basis of hearsay (v. 21). He will go down and take a look, as he did at the Babel tower (11:5).

**18:22-26.** Abraham and the three visitors have apparently been standing at the beginning of the descent to the Dead Sea. Two of the three now set off. The short way to Sodom would again be via Ein Gedi (though see the comment on 14:7); the more civilized way for ordinary human beings would be via Arad and Nahal Zohar or via Beer Sheba and the Scorpions Ascent, south of the Dead Sea. Meanwhile Abraham is still standing in front of Yahweh in the position of a servant (e.g., 41:46), the position he has been occupying since the three visitors arrived. But it seems that he now knows who the third visitor is, from vv. 20-21. And the nature of his servanthood is about to change. It will become more that of a prophet, who may ask his Lord quite confrontational questions—again like Amos.[[443]](#footnote-443)

Thus Abraham comes up (*nāgaš*)to Yahweh (v. 23). The verb can denote a priest or Levite approaching God, or approaching the altar or the sanctuary (e.g., Exod 19:22; Num 4:19; 8:19). It’s a solemn thing to do. But Abraham doesn’t fall down as he did in 17:1. There is a kind of confidence and boldness about this coming up to God. There is even more boldness about his question, as there was about his question and wish in 17:17-18. As was the case there, it’s not formally a prayer, though it likely implies one. For the audience it’s a dialogue from which they might learn both to think and to pray. The faithless (*rāšā‘*) is the opposite of the faithful, though less obviously so than is suggested by the antithetical relationship of those two words in English. The faithless ignore obligations to human beings or to God. They do what they like. They ignore the needs of people who have a claim on them. If a town is nearly full of such people, but there are some faithful people there, would Yahweh really sweep away the faithful with the faithless who deserve it? Abraham is not asking a question that relates to Lot in particular, or praying for Lot. He’s asking a question about a town, praying for Sodom.[[444]](#footnote-444) He speaks about “a faithful person” and “a faithless person.” They are types: he is not thinking of there being one individual of either type.[[445]](#footnote-445)

After all, it may seem unlikely that a town is 100% faithless people (vv. 24-25). If Yahweh treated the faithful and the faithless in the same way, God would be dishonoring himself. He would not be being God. He would be behaving like (say) an Israelite offering one of his children to another deity (Lev 18:21; 20:3). It’s an extraordinarily strong declaration. Abraham has no compunction about pointing out to God things that are obvious. It seems necessary to do so, just in case Yahweh is not taking them into account as much as he might. Yahweh has been talking about Abraham’s obligation to exercise authority over his household in a faithful way. Abraham turns this talk back on God. It’s God’s job to exercise authority. Is this action what he would call exercising authority? The question will also drive his audience to think about what they mean by fairness and how they think of God and to see that God would rather acquit some guilty than condemn some innocent.[[446]](#footnote-446) Like Amos, again (e.g., Amos 7:1-9), Abraham does not ask Yahweh just to save the fifty. Perhaps he simply recognizes that life is not like that. By their nature, events like the fall of Samaria or of Jerusalem overwhelm the town as a whole. What about the destruction of Sodom?

Yahweh accepts the argument (v. 26). He has not declared the intention to destroy Sodom, only to investigate it—but with the implication that action will then be necessary. There is no indication that he had not thought of the possibility Abraham raises or that he needs persuading.

**18:27-28**. Abraham is thus emboldened to press him further, though to speak of bargaining or bartering is misleading.[[447]](#footnote-447) He recognizes that as a human being he was shaped from dirt (2:7); in addition, being in the dirt suggests being lowly (1 Sam 2:8; 1 Kings 16:2). Ash appears with dirt in Job 30:19; 42:6. It is usually a sign of mourning, perhaps because being covered in ash suggests being grimy and disheveled through proximity to or contact with the fire on which people cooked and relied for warmth, and then because they deliberately smear it on themselves to enhance the impression of unkemptness. The link between ash and mourning might also suggest mortality, which can also be an implication of being made from dirt (Gen 3:19). So Abraham is saying, “I’m just a mortal human being before the Lord.” But it doesn’t stop him asking his question. Cunningly he takes up the verb “devastate” (*šāḥat*)which Yahweh had used of the deluge (e.g., 6:13), an action he had promised not to repeat (9:11, 15).[[448]](#footnote-448) Did Yahweh mean it? Again Yahweh accepts the argument.

**18:29-32.** Abraham presses on, now astutely adding the verb “enrage” which featured in Yahweh’s rebuke of Cain (4:5-6). Yahweh keeps agreeing. Eventually they come down to ten, which perhaps implies one family. If the audience might be asking, “what if there are less than ten?” the story which follows in 19:1-29 may give the answer, if Lot and his family count as “faithful.”[[449]](#footnote-449) But ten is also the minimum number for a Jewish prayer meeting (cf. *b. Megillah* 23b, which could usefully have claimed this passage among its prooftexts),[[450]](#footnote-450) and TgPsJ takes that fact as the clue to Abraham’s numbers. They had started from fifty as indicating a minyan in each of the five towns, with the eventual implication that even a prayer meeting in one town could have forestalled the calamity.[[451]](#footnote-451)

**18:33**. The conversation had been one that Yahweh wanted to initiate (vv. 17-21). Abraham had been standing in the manner of someone serving Yahweh, while he was confronting Yahweh, but it was Yahweh who had waited there for him to do so. He had been serving Yahweh by asking his questions for the sake of the people hearing this story. And when Yahweh is done with this service of him on Abraham’s part, Yahweh goes, as he did in 17:22, and Abraham returns to his tent. The sidebar to episode one in this story is over. By his prayer and his questions Abraham has fulfilled the vocation to which v. 18 referred. He has been being a blessing.[[452]](#footnote-452)

**19:1-3**. So episode two can commence. While Yahweh and Abraham have been having their dialogue, the other two visitors have reached Sodom. As Abraham now knows that one visitor was Yahweh in human form, so it is now explicit that the other two are envoys,[[453]](#footnote-453) though there is no indication that Lot realizes it. Like the three when they arrived at Mamre, they seem just like human beings. As we are apparently invited to suspend disbelief about how long it would have taken to make the lunch that Abraham commissioned and organized in 18:6-8, so it is with regard to the journey to Sodom (it would have taken human beings several days in real time). Lot might be not the only Sodom resident sitting in the gate plaza at the end of the day’s work as the cool of the evening arrived; many of the men in the town would gather there. Given that it is now dinner time, the visitors’ arrival forms the same test of hospitality as the three brought to Abraham, and Lot passes the test. Sitting near the Sodom gateway like Abraham sitting at the tent entrance, he hastens to meet and greet the visitors when he sees them, and bows down before them like Abraham. While he doesn’t run as Abraham did, he does bow even lower than Abraham, face to the ground.

“Sirs,” he begins (v. 2), like Abraham.[[454]](#footnote-454) His invitation again includes the chance to bathe the muck off their feet and in due course to be on their way, but otherwise it is the invitation appropriate to the evening rather than to lunchtime—not a sandwich and some water but somewhere to stay for the night and the chance to make an early start in the morning. It was not impossible to shelter in the town square (it would feel safer than in the open country), though it was not ideal: see Judg 19, which as a whole makes for horrifying comparison and contrast with Gen 19. The envoys politely refuse (as they did not in 18:3-5); it is the appropriate response, though one does not expect the refusal to be accepted.

Lot duly coerces them (v. 3). Like Abraham with his fatted calf, he goes beyond the call of duty. Indeed, he emulates Abraham with his banquet and his flat bread, which they would hardly need after that gargantuan lunch. What a worthy nephew of Abraham Lot is![[455]](#footnote-455)

**19:4-5.** Then things fall apart. Perhaps the men of the town, in particular, were indeed in the square when the visitors arrived and Lot invited them in, though the story did not say so. But when the story now refers to the *’ănāšîm* of the town, the *’ănāšîm* of Sodom, there is no particular reason to think that they are just the men. While there are passages that use phrases such as *hā’ănāšîm ‘al-hannāšîm* (Exod 35:22) to refer to men and women respectively, expressions such as *’anšê hā’āreṣ*, the people of the country (Lev 18:11), denote the community as a whole. Here, the emphatic terminology (“the entire people, from every part”) suggests that the whole community is there, not just the men.[[456]](#footnote-456) It indicates that there are not going to be ten people here to make Yahweh spare the town if the question arises, as it is about to. “The text focuses on communal responsibility, on what happens when sin and its effects become systemic, that is, so pervasive that an entire community is caught up in them.”[[457]](#footnote-457)

Because the town proposes something like gang rape (v. 5). Given that the visitors are (apparently) men, the proposal might imply homosexual rape, but it might just as likely imply that it will be women who will have sex with them,[[458]](#footnote-458) which would also make for a link with vv. 30-38. Whereas Western readers are inclined to think of sex as related to love and commitment or to sensual pleasure (or both), the phenomenon of rape generally presupposes that it relates to power and humiliation or shaming.[[459]](#footnote-459) Here, at least, it is a response to fear.[[460]](#footnote-460) The whole town is afraid of these strangers.

**19:6-8.** The reason Lot shut the door was to protect the envoys. If vv. 4-5 seems hard to believe, what follows is more so. Commendably, Lot wants to keep the Sodomites, his “brothers,” from doing something bad. Genesis picks up the word “bad” which came in 6:5; 8:21; he is in the midst of proving that Yahweh’s assessment still applies (cf. also 13:13).

Lot thinks he might be able to protect the envoys by offering the Sodomites his daughters (v. 8). But what is the point of the offer? While it has been suggested that he is fulfilling the expectations of Israelite hospitality by offering them for sex,[[461]](#footnote-461) commentators do not provide evidence for this interpretation beyond a reference to Judg 19, which is hardly narrated as a positive expression of Israelite values. Admittedly, an offer of sex with his virgin daughters might interest the men in the crowd. But is Lot then serious or is he trying to jolt the community to its senses? Can the Sodomites tell the difference between what is bad and what is good in their eyes? The word for “sleeping with” again more literally means “knowing.” Have they profited at all from their ultimate parents’ eating from the *good*-and-*bad*-*knowledge*-tree? But anyway, Lot does not invite the crowd to sleep with his daughters, and it’s not obvious why this would satisfy their reasons for wanting to “know” the strangers. Maybe Lot is rather offering them as hostages.[[462]](#footnote-462)

**19:9-11.** If Lot had been sittingin the gateway like the citizens of Sodom, the actual citizens now put him in his place. And if he thinks they are his “brothers,” they will remind him of his actual status as a resident alien whose green card could be withdrawn at any moment.[[463]](#footnote-463) First they tell him to get away from the door that he had shut. Then unbeknown to themselves, they pay him a compliment. The audience knows Yahweh’s expectation that Abraham should exercise authority in accordance with faithfulness, and in connection with Yahweh’s intentions for Sodom, Abraham has been challenging Yahweh about the proper exercise of authority. Lot has been faithful in his exercise of hospitality to the two “men” (2 Peter 2:6 describes him as *dikaios*, the equivalent Greek word to *ṣaddîq*),and now ironically the Sodomites “accuse” him of daring to behave as if *mišpāṭ* in Sodom is his business. “Up to this point in the Genesis story, Lot has enjoyed a measure of peace and stability alongside the Sodomites, as long as he did not challenge the social hierarchy. Now that he seeks to defend two strangers, whose social status is even lower than his own, he is to suffer the same aggression that the visitors have attracted.”[[464]](#footnote-464) Like good postmodern people, the Sodomites suggest that “Lot should not presume to force his social values on them.”[[465]](#footnote-465) If he resists their doing something that he says is bad, they will show him what bad dealing feels like.[[466]](#footnote-466)

In the event (vv. 10-11), the two “men” protect Lot, shut the door again, and show that they are more than ordinary men by terminating for a while the Sodomites’ capacity to fulfill their aims. Again Genesis notes that the whole community was involved, “from young right to old.”

**19:12-14.** The story jumps forward: it would be logical to have the intention which comes as v. 13 preceding the exhortation to action which comes in v. 12. But the action is what is required, so it comes first. The envoys again show a mixture of prophetic knowledge and ignorance. The answer to the question in v. 12 is two daughters and two virtual sons-in-law, and/or one or more actual sons-in-law; in the latter case there are more daughters to take into account. In addition, there is a wife who is taken for granted. The fact that they total rather less than the ten at which Abraham stopped in his quizzing of Yahweh might link with that stopping point. They need to get out rather than thinking that Yahweh may hold back from acting against the town.

Because he is going to act (v. 13). Perhaps the townspeople’s behavior and their refusal to respond to Lot is the last straw. More precisely, the two “men” are going to act on Yahweh’s behalf—it is part of what envoys are for. They explicitly pick up the talk of outcry and devastation from Yahweh’s words and from the dialogue in 18:20-32, as the reference to family members implicitly takes up the reference to the possibility of there being ten faithful people in Sodom.

The “sons-in-law” (v. 14) might have been young men in the position of Mary’s almost-husband Joseph—”virtual sons-in-law” in that they are legally yoked to Lot’s daughters, but the marriage has not yet taken place. But the reference in v. 15 to daughters in Lot’s house, which implies there were other daughters who were no longer there, suggests that rather the sons-in-law are the husbands of Lot’s older daughters. Lot goes to talk to the husbands as the heads of the households where his older daughters now live. Laughter again features in the story, but with unfortunate implications.

**19:15-26.** Lot is dithering.[[467]](#footnote-467) It’s another expression of his ambivalent relationship with Sodom, which had attracted him because of its positive qualities. In some ways he is a faithful man, though dim-witted pragmatically as well as morally—a Jekyll and Hide character.[[468]](#footnote-468) Fortunately for him the envoys roll their eyes and have pity on him, and strong-arm and his family out of the town so they don’t get swept away (the verb picked up from 18:23, 24). The envoys don’t intend then to transport them to safety. Lot needs to take responsibility for himself (the “you” in v. 17 is singular) and presumably for his family.

There is still little prospect of his doing so (vv. 18-20). He has indeed experienced grace and commitment (*ḥēn* and *ḥesed*). The former nicely puts him in the same category as Noah (6:8) and also Abraham (18:3). He then has the distinction of being the first person in the Scriptures to talk about *ḥesed*, which denotes the kind of commitment that anticipates faithfulness and is itself thus an expression of grace, and also the kind of commitment that keep going when its recipient has behaved in a way that forfeits any right to expect faithfulness. By definition grace and commitment are undeserved but by definition they then look for a response. Lot doesn’t understand that implication. He would just like more of them. Apparently he thinks he won’t be able to get to the mountains in time to escape the effects of the catastrophe, and illogically thinks he could be safe in a nearby town that won’t be affected by the disaster, like people who ignore instructions to evacuate when a hurricane is forecast and take refuge in their attic.

Again the envoy (or is it Yahweh, who has now arrived?) rolls his eyes (vv. 21-22) and Lot finds that sometimes God grants unreasonable requests for more grace and commitment.[[469]](#footnote-469) Indeed, the envoy or Yahweh says he can’t take action until Lot gets his act together.[[470]](#footnote-470) It would be unfitting for him as God. His statement is the converse of Abraham’s challenges about exercising authority in the way proper to the God of all the earth, and about what desecrates Yahweh (18:25). There is nothing outside God that binds God; but God is bound by who he is. *Ṣā‘îr* means “small” (it comes four times in vv. 30-38 to describe Lot’s younger daughter as opposed to his elder daughter). *Ṣo‘ar* is Little-ton.

Apparently Lot and company get themselves to Ṣo‘ar (vv. 23-25) between first light and sunup, which is hardly more than half an hour or so (TgPsJ gives them three hours for the journey). We don’t know exactly where any of the towns are so we don’t know the distance but the story is again talking dramatic time rather than real time, though it is now doing so in connection with the travel time required by human beings as well by supernatural visitors. Lot and family thus arrive at the moment when Yahweh devastates Sodom, Gomorrah, and the surrounding area, along with everything that grows, and presumably with those substantial flocks and herds belonging to Lot (and to other Sodomites). An earthquake in the Dead Sea region could doubtless release asphalt and sulfur into the sky which could then fall “from the heavens,” but Genesis says only that the disaster is one that Yahweh directly brought about. And “burning sulfur” is a conventional image for horrific means of destruction (Deut 29:23 [22]; Ps 11:6; Isa 30:23; 34:9; Ezek 38:22).[[471]](#footnote-471)

Apparently his wife looks back behind Lot (v. 26), who had pushed his family out ahead of him. Whereas Yahweh directly rained down the burning sulfur, he did not personally strike down Lot’s wife. Her simply feeling compelled to look back is easy to imagine, a natural human instinct. She is not a wicked person like some other people in Genesis whom one could mention. TgNeoph explains that she was a Sodomite herself who thus looks back to see what will happen to her family. Another midrash gives her the name Irit or Idit and explains that she looked back because she had left behind those two other daughters (who were already married to those two sons-in-law). Deut 29:23 [22] perhaps implies that everyone in Sodom was turned into salt pilasters,[[472]](#footnote-472) which would include the two daughters, whose fate a mother might have willed to share. Thus “she was turned into salt either because God couldn’t forgive her this desire… or because He could.”[[473]](#footnote-473) Was it a catatonic reaction to the trauma of what she was going through?[[474]](#footnote-474) To be literalistic, maybe the reference to her looking implies she delayed and got overwhelmed by the burning sulfur which was overwhelming everyone, and then got encrusted with salt.[[475]](#footnote-475) It’s possible to imagine her as one of the salt formations around the southern part of the Dead Sea. Indeed, Wisdom 10:7 refers to it, and Josephus (*Antiquities* I, 11:4) says he has seen it. When Pompeii was destroyed, *“*a volcanic gassettled over the city, asphyxiating many of the citizens while they slept. The city was thencovered with heavy depositsof volcanic ash up to a depth of about twenty feet in which human and animal life was entombed…. Thechemical content of the ash*…* apparently turned human bodies into some chemical substance that was sufficiently hard to allow the surrounding ash to retain a perfect cast of the bodies.”[[476]](#footnote-476) Even if we sympathize with Lot’s wife, we have to see her fate as a warning (Luke 17:26-32). But it’s all right, says TgNeoph: she is there only until resurrection day.

**19:27-29**. Meanwhile Abraham got going early that same morning. The verb (*šākam* hiphil) commonly signifies a serious commitment to doing something, something you therefore get up early to do (it described Lot’s expectations about the envoys’ early departure in v. 2). Abraham knew from Yahweh’s revelation that the catastrophe was imminent. He returned to the point where they had seen off the envoys, where he had then had his dialogue with Yahweh, and from where he could see the devastation. The narrator’s “there” again draws us into looking at the scene though his eyes. Now “Abraham looks down on the scene of the disaster—and is silent.”[[477]](#footnote-477) Genesis does not tell us that he knew that Lot had been saved, though the audience knows.[[478]](#footnote-478)

In what sense has God been mindful of Abraham? (v. 29). His dialogue with Yahweh had not saved Sodom, though it had expressed his bold and passionate concern for the town, and as far as one can tell it had not been concerned to save Lot. This reference to God’s mindfulness links back more directly not to Gen 18 but to the deluge story (see 8:1). The further occurrence of the verb “devastate” (cf. 18:28, 31, 32; 19:13, 14) also makes the link (cf. 6:13, 17; 9:11, 15). Indeed, the talk of “God” rather than “Yahweh” (as in 8:1, but in this verse alone in 18:1—19:38) underscores it.[[479]](#footnote-479) God has been mindful of Abraham as he was mindful of Noah, though the direct beneficiary of the mindfulness is Abraham’s nephew Lot and his family instead of Noah and his family. God has been mindful of a commitment to Abraham and thus to his family.

**19:30-38.** Lot continues to dither. Is he afraid that the inhabitants of Zo‘ar will turn out the same as the inhabitants of Sodom, or that there might be another disaster? Is he failing to have faith in the envoys’ word? Or is he being wiser than he was when he went to live near Sodom in the first place? Does he note the irony in the difference between how well he was doing back then (13:5-6) and how pathetic are his circumstances now? The only other cave in Genesis will be the one where his aunt and uncle are buried; elsewhere in the Scriptures caves are just places where desperate people hide. Lot and his daughters are such people. His action is one that implies there is no hope.

His daughters refuse to give up on hope (vv. 31-35), though the action they therefore take raises eyebrows. The story that follows again recalls Noah; Lot, too, has unpleasant experiences of the interaction of drink and sex with his offspring for which he can hardly be held totally responsible, though in its brief summary of Gen 18—19, *Jub* 16:1-9 does have room to condemn what happens as an unprecedented sin, and specifically to condemn Lot for what happened. “At the beginning of the chapter he was willing to let the virginity of his daughters be forcibly defiled, without even informing them, in order to save lives. Now, in order to ‘maintain life,’ his daughters have lost their virginity by forcing themselves upon him without his knowledge.”[[480]](#footnote-480) Thus their seduction of their own father “can be considered poetic justice—a fitting fate for someone willing to bargain away his daughters’ sexuality.”[[481]](#footnote-481) But maybe “Lot, incapacitated by drunkenness and sleep, did not remember that he had lost his wife, but he thought she was present.”[[482]](#footnote-482) Having been set on the way by God’s promise through being part of the family of his uncle Abraham (Gen 12), he first turned aside from this association (Gen 13), then needed rescuing by him (Gen 14): has he now “finally slipped completely from God’s hand”? But Genesis recounts the story with sympathy for a man who was not so much wicked as foolish.[[483]](#footnote-483)

Compared with their father, his daughters are clear-thinking, purposeful, and resourceful (where did they get the wine from?), even if equally misguided. “The narrator presents both sisters as acting out of desperation, indicating that neither should be judged too harshly.”[[484]](#footnote-484) Their position somewhat resembles Sarah’s in Gen 16 or Rachel’s in Gen 30 or Tamar’s in Gen 38. Desperate circumstances require desperate measures. Their father will not live forever (though he is presumably quite a bit younger than his uncle Abraham) and they are going to be on their own. They make a moral choice, “opting for the family’s survival over its honor.”[[485]](#footnote-485) In what sense are there no potential partners to have sex with them in the way the world regularly does? Are they thinking of the world within their reach—is the comment another observation on the people who live in places like Zo‘ar? Do they suspect that the catastrophe has overwhelmed the entire human world?[[486]](#footnote-486) Anyway, they have seen their home town destroyed, the destruction has embraced their elder sisters and their husbands (or their own prospective husbands), they have seen their mother die, and their father has contracted out of life, like Jonah sleeping in the depths of the boat. Perhaps “the incest of these women [might] be purer than the chastity of many women.”[[487]](#footnote-487)

In light of where the story ends (vv. 36-38), it might bring a smirk to the audience’s faces. “You know those Moabites and Ammonites [who did not appear in Gen 10)]? Let me tell you where they came from!” While the audience might well find their scheme obnoxious, it is also a way Abraham becomes the “father” of many nations.[[488]](#footnote-488) And Yahweh will give land to both these nations that descend from Lot and will protect them from the Israelites (Deut 2:9, 19).[[489]](#footnote-489) “Vv. 30-38 hardly offer themselves as a kerygma”; they are folk material. [[490]](#footnote-490) But the Scriptures make every excuse for the two women and for Lot. So given that we are sinners, we should resist the temptation to condemn them.[[491]](#footnote-491) And shall we not marvel that these daughters of a mother who understandably gave in to her hopelessness, “these intrepid women, were able to survive, to live on, to become the mothers of great nations?”[[492]](#footnote-492)

## Three Persons, One God?

From time to time God “appears” in the world in human form. So far in Genesis, God has appeared in order to give extra force to commitments and promises he makes to Abraham (12:7; 17:1; and the “vision” in 15:1), and this consideration may also be implicit in Gen 18. God’s appearing is then a gracious and merciful act for the sake of people. But the explicit reason for God’s appearing in Gen 18 is to check out the situation in the world (18:21), as God had in 11:7 (without reference to “appearing”). He is here visiting the world for his own sake—or for humanity’s sake in the sense that he comes to ensure that he then treats humanity in a fair way. Even if he might know what is happening because he can see from his position in the heavens or because he can send his envoys, he comes in person to check things out. He does not rely on remote knowledge; he becomes involved.[[493]](#footnote-493)

As Luther sees it, one of the advantages of the account of his appearing in Gen 18 is its “unique evidence concerning the Trinity,” though Luther knows that Jewish scholars laugh at this understanding.[[494]](#footnote-494) Ibn Ezra indeed notes that some people say that “God is three men: He is one and He is three and they are inseparable,” but he observes that this idea does not fit the way the passage talks in terms of God, and then of three angels one of whom brings the message to Sarah while the other two go off to destroy Sodom and to save Lot.[[495]](#footnote-495) Augustine also argues from the alternating of the references to the persons that the three are angels (as Heb 13:2 implies) even though God was in all three and was working through them in a remarkable way.[[496]](#footnote-496) Luther in the end grants that, historically understood, the passage does not refer to the Trinity, but that an exposition along these lines may nevertheless be edifying. It adorns rather than proves.[[497]](#footnote-497)

Such approaches to understanding the three visitors are instructive in the way they do not provide satisfying answers. They point us in a different direction with regard to the significance of the portrait of them. How does God so appear in the world in human form? In one sense it is a quite an easy thing; he made humanity in his image, so appearing in human form is not so complicated. The appearing of God as an *’îš* again suggests a biblical rather than Greek starting point for understanding Jesus’s incarnation.[[498]](#footnote-498)

Yet the story suggests that it is complicated, by portraying the movement over how many visitors there are at different points and whether they are the same sort of beings and whether all three “represent” God or whether one represents God and the other two are envoys, who also, however, in some sense “represent” God.[[499]](#footnote-499) While some of the movement in the portrayal issues from switching between telling the story between the perspective of the narrator (who knows more than Abraham does) and that of the participants, this dynamic does not explain everything. Some of the ambiguity reflects the narrator’s own lack of clarity (narrators in the First Testament may know more than the characters in their stories, but they are not omniscient), which reflects the inherent mystery of the reality the narrative describes. The elusiveness recurs when God is incarnate in Jesus and when the church finds it hard to conceptualize insights about the nature of God and about the person of Jesus, which it has to do as much by means of paradox and by negative statements as by clarity and by positive statements. Finding the Trinity in the First Testament obscures more than it clarifies. It hinders our hearing what God was saying and is saying through this story.

## Intercession and Theodicy

While Abraham’s dialogue with God has traditionally been taken as a model of intercession,[[500]](#footnote-500) Western interests have inspired interpreters to locate the importance of the dialogue in its significance in connection with theodicy;[[501]](#footnote-501) Westermann calls it a theological discussion.[[502]](#footnote-502) Von Rad gives the impression of being caught between these alternative understandings, but in the end his indecision is creative. The conversation between Abraham and God happens, he notes, “in view of the sinful city lying at a distance in the valley, the city which had no idea either of its judge or of its intercessor.” But “Abraham is not especially concerned with saving Lot, not even with saving Sodom.” The dialogue is a means of discussing a theological question. Further, Sodom does not stand for a town outside the covenant people. “Sodom is here for Israel the pattern of a human community toward which Yahweh’s eyes turn in judgment.” The question is, “what determines God’s judgment on Sodom, the wickedness of the many or the innocence of the few?”But, he also comments, “the narrator would scarcely feel himself badly misunderstood if we were to read this text from the viewpoint of intercession and its power.”[[503]](#footnote-503) As intercession, it compares with Amos 7. “It’s a forceful and impulsive prayer, as if Abraham wanted to compel God to forgive.”[[504]](#footnote-504) The story encourages the audience to think, but in light of the thinking that it encourages, it also drives it to be faithful, because a small number of faithful may make all the difference, and it drives it to pray, to advocate with God.[[505]](#footnote-505) “What gives Abraham the ‘right’ to argue with God and question his intentions?” The answer must be the covenantal relationship between God and Israel, which puts obligations on God as well as on Abraham.[[506]](#footnote-506)

The First Testament may indeed be interested in the question of theodicy, or at least it offers materials that facilitate reflection on the question. Will Yahweh be bound to destroy Sodom if he finds that the rumor about its waywardness is broadly true? Yahweh agrees that he is not bound by any such system.[[507]](#footnote-507) On the other hand, neither is he bound to operate in the way Gen 18 describes. “God does not here bind himself by a perpetual rule” but “speaks thus, in order to make it better known, that he does not, on light grounds, proceed to the destruction of a city.”[[508]](#footnote-508) While Yahweh here declares that he will spare a town if there are ten faithful people there, in Jer 5:1 he says he will do so if there is one truthful person there. On the other hand, in Ezek 14:12-23 he declares that he would not do so even if one famously faithful person (such as Noah) were there.[[509]](#footnote-509) And he brings judgment on Jerusalem despite the presence of people such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel, though for them, it’s not the end of the story. Further, if there is a tension between 18:23-33 and 19:1-28, and if (for instance) 18:23-33 is a critique of the assumptions underlying 19:1-28,[[510]](#footnote-510) then Genesis invites us to work with the tension rather than letting either passage override or silence the other. In Amos 7—9, too, both perspectives appear. The question of the waywardness and the punishment of communities is too complicated for there to be one answer. Each time the question arises, God has to think about it afresh and decide how to weigh the different considerations this time. And this reality is one reason why prayer makes a difference as we urge God to weigh the considerations in a different way from the one he may be inclined to.

Jer 31:29-30 and Ezek 18 can also be brought into the framework of this discussion, but their concern is different. Their issue is whether Yahweh punishes one generation for the wrongdoing of an earlier generation.[[511]](#footnote-511) The issue in Job is different again: “he finishes off the person of integrity and the faithless person” (Job 9:22).

# Genesis 20:1-18—Abraham and Abimelek (1)

## Overview

Gen 20 tells a story like the one in 12:9—13:4. Abraham goes to live in a certain ruler’s territory as a resident alien, he’s afraid that the people there will kill him in order to get hold of Sarah, and he therefore asks her to say she is his sister. The king does get hold of Sarah but God intervenes and causes sickness in the ruler’s household. The ruler discovers the cause, challenges Abraham, and gives Sarah back. Abraham ends up vastly enriched by the adventure.

This second story differs from the first in taking place in Gerar rather than Egypt, and the ruler is a person of noteworthy integrity. God appears to him and informs him that Abraham is a prophet who can plead for him, Abraham explains that Sarah really is his (half-)sister, and the ruler invites him to stay in his realm rather than leave immediately.

Knowledge of the first story helps to make sense of the second story, while conversely the second story helps to clarify questions raised by the first.

## Translation

1Abraham moved on from there to the southland[[512]](#footnote-512) region and lived between Qadeš and Šur, and resided as an alien in Gerar.[[513]](#footnote-513) 2Abraham said of[[514]](#footnote-514) Śarah his wife, “She’s my sister.”[[515]](#footnote-515) Abimelek king of Gerar sent and got Śarah, 3but God came to Abimelek in a dream by night and said to him, “Here, you’re a dead man[[516]](#footnote-516) because of the woman that you got. She belongs to someone.”[[517]](#footnote-517)

4Now Abimelek had not approached her.[[518]](#footnote-518) He said, “Lord, a nation, yes a faithful one—would you kill it? 5That man said to me, ‘She’s my sister,’ didn’t he, and she herself also said, ‘He’s my brother.’ It was with integrity in my heart and with freedom from guilt in the palms of my hands[[519]](#footnote-519) that I did this.” 6God said to him in the dream, “I myself both know that you did this with integrity in your heart, and have also held you back from doing wrong in relation to me. That’s why I didn’t permit you to touch her. 7So now give the man’s wife back, because he’s a prophet, and he can plead for you. Save your life. But if you don’t give her back, acknowledge that you will definitely die,[[520]](#footnote-520) you and everything that’s yours.”

8Abimelek started early in the morning, called for all his servants, and spoke all these things in their ears. The men were in great awe.[[521]](#footnote-521) 9Abimelek called for Abraham and said to him, “What have you done to us? How did I do wrong in relation to you, that you’ve brought a big wrong on me and on my entire kingdom? You’ve done deeds with me that shouldn’t be done.”

10So Abimelek said to Abraham, “What did you see that you did this thing?” 11Abraham said, “Because I said, ‘There’s just no awe for God in this place, and they’ll kill me on account of my wife.’ 12And also, she truly is my sister, my father’s daughter, admittedly not my mother’s daughter. So she became my wife, 13and when God made me wander[[522]](#footnote-522) from my father’s household, I said to her, ‘This is the commitment with which you’re to act toward me. In[[523]](#footnote-523) the entire region[[524]](#footnote-524) to which we come: say about me, “He’s my brother.”’”

14Abimelek got flock and herd, servants and maidservants, and gave them to Abraham, and gave his wife Śarah back to him. 15Abimelek said, “Here, my country is before you. Live wherever is good in your eyes.” 16To Śarah he said, “Here, I’m giving[[525]](#footnote-525) your brother a thousand pieces of silver. Here, it will be cover over the eyes for you and for everyone who is with you and with everyone, and you’ll be vindicated.”[[526]](#footnote-526)

17Abraham pleaded with God and God healed Abimelek and his wife and his handmaids, and they gave birth 18(because Yahweh had totally held back every womb belonging to Abimelek’s household on account of Śarah, Abraham’s wife).

## Interpretation

Gen 20 is an intriguingly-told tale, a “refined” narrative, artfully composed, its tension heightened through withholding information which the audience needs in order to understand it and giving some of this information only later.[[527]](#footnote-527) The audience might wonder why Abraham said that Sarah was his sister; its guess would be confirmed or disconfirmed or its uncertainty resolved by vv. 10-13. It might wonder how God held Abimelek back from touching Sarah and why he needed Abraham’s prayers; vv. 17-18 would confirm or disconfirm its guesses or resolve its uncertainty. It might wonder why Abraham moved from Mamre to the Negev; v. 13 might make it infer that such movements were part of Abraham’s anticipatorily entering into possession of more and more of the promised land. Further, as it listens to the story, knowing or not knowing the story in 12:1—13:4 would make a difference.[[528]](#footnote-528) Why did Abraham move from the Negev to Gerar? People who knew the earlier story might infer that there was a famine in the Negev. Why was Abimelek interested in Sarah? People might infer that it was her political value as a member of Abraham’s family, but if they knew the earlier story, they might infer that it was her attractiveness. She is eighty-nine, but in “real” terms that’s more like fifty, and fifty-year old women can be attractive; they can also be worldly-wise and efficient (see Prov 31), and she could be a potential management asset.[[529]](#footnote-529) Why was God so concerned to protect Sarah? People who knew the broader story of Abraham and Sarah would know that she is due to be the mother of the child through whom God intends to fulfill his promise of blessing.

While some elements in the first story could thus provide background to the second, some elements in the second story answer questions raised by the first. Did Sarah go along with Abraham’s plan? Was she prepared even to sacrifice her own sexual integrity? Sometimes women have been prepared to do so in such a situation.[[530]](#footnote-530) Maybe she said what she was supposed to say. Did Pharaoh have sex with her? Maybe the afflictions that came upon him and his household stopped him. How would someone like Pharaoh have known that it was his taking Sarah that explained the afflictions among his household? Maybe a dream is the answer. Maybe a ruler who acts in that way is nevertheless a person of integrity. Was Abraham as much of a rogue as he seems to have been in relation to Pharaoh and Sarah? Yes and more, though he has some pathetic excuses. Did the event ruin Sarah’s reputation? Maybe Pharaoh compensated her in a way that would make her innocence clear. What happened to the household after Pharaoh had released Sarah? Maybe Abraham prayed for him and for them, and the story ended happily for everyone.

This last feature puts us on the track of its possible broader point, which connects with its place in the Abraham and Sarah narrative as a whole. Yahweh’s initial directive and promise to Abraham related to land, increase, and blessing—experienced and mediated. Gen 12:9—13:4 related an event which imperiled the entire project. Gen 20 reopens the questions raised there, particularly the question whether Abraham can have a wholesome relationship with other nations and whether God cares about them. Here Abraham again imperils that possibility, but God reaches out to Abimelek. God is caught between Abraham to whom he is committed though he is a rogue, and Abimelek who is a person of integrity and faithfulness but whom Abraham has led into unwitting wrongdoing. God takes action against Abimelek to stop him going further into wrongdoing, and also gets Abimelek to put things right. He uses Abraham as a means of restoring Abimelek from the mess he has got Abimelek into, and a means of his household being blessed. And he uses Abimelek as a means of blessing Abraham. The chapter thus conveys a mixed message in relation to God’s promise to Abraham. Will he possess the land? Verse 13 suggests a glimmer of a reassurance. Will he have offspring? God has shown himself able to open Gerar’s wombs, but not Sarah’s yet. Will Abraham be a blessing? Not so much, but at least he can be the means of reversing a curse.

The second story never comments on the fact that the event is apparently a repeat of an earlier one (unless v. 13 implies it). Nor thus does it raise the question why Abraham made the same mistake twice. While it might seem “astonishing”[[531]](#footnote-531) and implausible that the same sort of thing should have recurred, it seems not much less plausible that it should have happened once. The more significant question is why the Scriptures include a second, similar story. Why do we need to read such a story twice? Presumably the second story is told and included in the Scriptures because it raises issues that are important enough to discuss twice and because it discusses them in a way that also allows insights to emerge that did not emerge from the first version. Whereas the first story with its reference to Sarah’s attractiveness suggests implications regarding a husband’s attitude to his wife’s sexuality, the absence of this reference in the second story and the anthropological background suggests implications regarding the way a husband may seek to use his wife in connection with politics or business or church. Women are often pawns, not least in the context of migration. Gen 20 is more reflective than 12:9—13:4. Dialogue between God and Abimelek and between Abimelek and Abraham is more prominent than action. There is comparison and contrast between the dialogues: both involve accusation which cannot be contested, and then defense which asks for extenuating circumstances to be taken into account, but in Abraham’s case the extenuating circumstances do not remove his guilt.[[532]](#footnote-532) Key elements in the action appear only in parenthesis near the end.

MT makes Gen 20 a second paragraph within 18:1—21:21, following on 18:1—19:38. In traditional Pentateuchal criticism it belongs to the Elohistic version of Abraham’s story, in which it is the equivalent of 12:9—13:4 in the Yahwistic version. The obvious marker is the use of the word *’ĕlōhîm* for God (though the closing parenthesis refers to Yahweh), but dreams are also characteristic of the Elohistic version.[[533]](#footnote-533)

The setting of Gen 20 in the context of the surrounding chapters raises another question, about the geographical references in these chapters. The data are as follows:

20:1a Abraham moves to live in the Negev

20:1b He goes as a temporary resident to Gerar

21:14 After her expulsion from the family Hagar wanders in the Beer Sheba wilderness

21:22-31 Abraham and the king of Gerar make a pact at Beer Sheba

21:32 The king returns to Philistine territory

21:33 Abraham is a long-time temporary resident in Philistine territory

22:19 Abraham lives in Beer Sheba.

Among the implications of these data, and the questions they raise, are the following.

1. The Negev in general and the Beer Sheba region in particular was home for Abraham through the period covered by these stories, which assumption raises no difficulties.
2. The Philistines are present in Abraham’s day and they control the Beer Sheba region. But most biblical references to the Philistines and all non-biblical references come from the period after the Israelites are in Canaan, nor are the Philistines associated with an area as far southeast as Beer Sheba.
3. While 10:18-19 refers to a place called Gerar near Gaza, forty or fifty miles north of Qadesh and Shur in what was subsequently Philistine territory, it describes it as Canaanite territory; and Abimelek looks like a Canaanite name, not a Philistine one, like Melkizedeq, though it is also the name of Gideon’s son (Judg 8:31).
4. *Jub* 16:10 has Abraham living “between Qadesh and Shur in the mountains of Gerar”— a different Gerar.[[534]](#footnote-534)

I infer that the Gerar to which Gen 20—22 refers is this southern Gerar in the Negev, and that the inhabitants of the area are called Philistines because it was Philistines who controlled the region around the northern Gerar when the story was being told in the time between Moses and David, though the area would have counted broadly as Canaan. But the audience might be bemused at the idea of Abraham getting involved with “Canaanites” in the way he does with “Philistines.”

**20:1-3.** The unusual introduction to the chapter with its account of Abraham’s move marks it as background to Gen 20—21 as a whole. It also portrays the relocation as a kind of reprise of movements in 12:9-10 and 16:7, 14; both links will imply some irony. There need be no particular reason for Abraham to move from Mamre to the Negev; tent-dwelling shepherd groups do move around. The area around Mamre gets more rainfall and therefore grows more grass, but for the same reason there might be more competition for pasture in that region (cf. 13:5-7—especially the reference to the other peoples living in the area). But maybe “from there” suggests getting away from the scene of the events in Gen 18—19 and specifically from Lot (so *GenR* 50:1-4); or perhaps (more positively) Abraham is continuing the process of fulfilling God’s command to settle in all the parts of Canaan.[[535]](#footnote-535) Specifically, he is staying temporarily in Gerar as a resident alien, as Lot had been in Sodom, and as he had been in Egypt. Like the towns in the Dead Sea area that featured in Gen 14, a place such as Gerar would be a nominally independent city-state which had a king whom one might think of as more like a mayor but which was subject to Egyptian control of its foreign policy and to Egyptian taxation.

In Gerar a question about Sarah arises (v. 2), as it did in 12:10-20. Perhaps we are to infer that Sarah would be just as good-looking in the eyes of Abimelek twenty years after the Egyptian escapade, when she was a mere seventy;[[536]](#footnote-536) it would be a wise view for a husband to take. But the convention that leaders use their womenfolk as diplomatic currency or that they value them as management assets makes this assumption unnecessary. The convention might mean that Abimelek has quite a harem even if only one wife (v. 17). His saying that he “got” Sarah might imply that he married her (cf. the use of the verb in 19:14), but to make this point it is common to add “as wife” (25:1, 20; 28:2, 6, 9), as Pharaoh did (12:19), and Sarah is here invariably described as Abraham’s wife.[[537]](#footnote-537)

The first distinctive theme in this version of the story (v. 3) is God’s appearing to Abimelek in a dream; such appearing will recur in the stories of Jacob and Laban and extensively in the Joseph story (Gen 28; 31; 37—42). The two methods of discipline that God employs in relation to Abimelek are dreams and afflictions.[[538]](#footnote-538) Sometimes God acts to stop a person doing something that would be objectively wrong; God warned Cain but didn’t stop him, and (as far as we know) didn’t warn the people of Sodom. God can also appear and give revelations in dreams to individuals outside the chosen people as well as to members of his chosen people (see also e.g., Daniel). While the First Testament can dismiss dreams or issue warnings about them (e.g., Jer 23:25-32; Qoh 5:3, 7 [2, 6]) as it can about prophecies and visions, in principle it doesn’t regard them as questionable in value or as inferior to other ways God communicates or people gain insight. A deity’s communicating with a king in a dream is also a familiar Middle Eastern notion. The king would be unwise to trust every dream, but he will be able to test this one by confronting Abraham with its contents. The story thus complements the earlier one in that 12:12 went straight to the afflictions Abraham brought about and never indicated how Pharaoh knew their cause, while this version jumps to the latter question and refers to the afflictions only later. God speaks to Abimelek not to declare a judge’s judgment but to warn him about the danger he is in.[[539]](#footnote-539) Although the Torah will make death the penalty for adultery, we know of no occasions when the penalty was exacted, and it is often a mistake to interpret the Torah as laying down laws for applying in the court, though in any case, the Torah’s rules have not yet been laid down. But further, the danger about adultery lies at least as much from the cuckolded husband as from the law (cf. Prov 6:34-35): “she belongs to someone.”

**20:4-7**. Western readers would have thought that “getting” a woman as a wife or a member of one’s harem would mean having sex with her at the first opportunity. But if a woman is prized as much as a sign of prestige or a means of making diplomatic alliances or a management resource as for reasons to do with sex, she is more like an item of clothing or jewelry in a Western context, which a purchaser may not feel the need to wear immediately (or maybe she would need an extensive beauty treatment like Esther, especially after spending a few decades in the desert).[[540]](#footnote-540) Abimelek addresses God as “Lord” in the same way as Abraham did in Gen 18 (and Moses in Exod 4—5; 34:9). His reference to killing a nation perhaps presupposes the afflictions of which we will hear in due course, which are not confined to the king (see vv. 17-18): if the royal household is never going to have any more babies, it does imperil the nation. God himself is the prospective executioner, which makes even clearer that v. 3 was not speaking simply of capital punishment for adultery. Perhaps the implicit point is that God will go to any lengths to protect Sarah because of her destiny to bear the child in whom God’s promise is due for fulfillment within a matter of months, and Abimelek’s action unwittingly puts it in jeopardy.[[541]](#footnote-541) But there’s no explicit reference to this consideration and it’s the king’s moral position that is in focus.[[542]](#footnote-542) His own words presuppose that a nation can be faithful. The word resonates with 18:23-32 and hints that Gerar is no Sodom. So the question it suggests is, “will God destroy the people of Gerar as he did the people of Sodom? Is Gerar next?”[[543]](#footnote-543)—even if the trouble issues from their happening to be in the wrong place at the wrong time rather than being as deserving as Sodom? [[544]](#footnote-544)

To underline his point (v. 5), Abimelek adds a claim to integrity, which is ironically the quality God expected of Abraham (17:1), and a claim to have the same qualities as Noah possessed (6:9). Is there a comedic, parodic aspect to the portrait?[[545]](#footnote-545) “My hands are clean,” moreover, he adds. The word (*nāqîn*) denotes being free of liability and thus exempt from punishment or obligation (Abraham will apply the related verb to his servant’s freedom from liability if he does his duty in seeking out a wife for Isaac). Faithfulness is thus spelled out in both positive and negative terms, in the presence of inner integrity and in the absence of wrongful outward action. So it’s possible for a ruler and a nation to be characterized by faithfulness and integrity. Faithfulness is a matter of the inner person and its intentions and desires. It’s also a matter of outward action with the hands and other parts of the body. But even if a person acts in ignorance and/or through being misled by someone else, their actions can be objectively wrong and can incur guilt. The narrative had not told us that Sarah had confirmed Abraham’s statement about their relationship, as it had not told us about the afflictions in the royal household. It focuses on certain features of the story, sometimes simply leaves the audience to fill in the gaps, sometimes fills them in later.

God confirms Abimelek’s claim (v. 6), apparently restating his words about clean hands with more general words about wrongdoing; God knows Abimelek is nothing like Sodom (13:13; 18:20). All Canaanites should not be tarred with the same brush.[[546]](#footnote-546) Again the audience has to fill in the gaps (or will be able to do so later) by working out that the afflictions were the means whereby God held him back. He did so for Sarah’s sake, for Abraham’s sake, for Abimelek’s sake, and for the sake of marital propriety, but also for his own sake. Abimelek’s wrongdoing would be committed “against me” both for moral-type reasons (cf. 39:9) and because Sarah has that special place in his purpose.

But Abimelek has to take action (v. 7), as Cain needed to but did not. God’s warning is also the one he issued to Eve (2:17), which she took little notice of. Here, both the fact of v. 3 and the fact of v. 6 have to be taken into account. The fact of v. 6 can only win over the fact of v. 3 if Abimelek takes the necessary action. Even though he has not had sex with Sarah, and even though it was not his fault that he had taken a married woman into his harem, he is still a dead man unless he puts things right. God makes two other striking points. One is that Abimelek’s actions will indeed have further consequences not just for himself but for the rest of his household, perhaps for his realm as a whole. Rulers are either a blessing or a curse to their people. The other is that Abraham has a role to play in putting things right. He doesn’t have to repent, though that might do no harm, and it is just as well that he doesn’t have to, because he doesn’t. Rather, while God could presumably put things right without Abraham being involved, he intends to involve Abraham in a way that might be seen as a form of repentance—not repentance in the form of sorrow but repentance in the sense of a change of direction. Instead of walking in a way that brings Abimelek trouble, he is to walk in a way that restores things for Abimelek. Abraham will be able to do so because he is a prophet, which means being a member of God’s cabinet who can speak up there on Abimelek’s behalf. We have had hints that Abraham is a quasi-prophetic figure (15:1-2; 18:17-21, 22-33); here his status is explicit.[[547]](#footnote-547) Technically it is another anachronism; the point of the designation is that Abraham can fulfill a key aspect of what belonged to the role of a prophet in the audience’s day. And a prophet can pray for people outside the chosen people as well as for insiders. “Pleading” (*pālal* hitpael) in this context means intercession, asking God to do something for someone else (cf. 1 Sam 12:19, 23—Samuel as a prophet), though in other contexts it can mean asking God to do something for oneself (e.g., 1 Sam 1; 1 Kings 8). While this word and related words usually denote prayer, they sometimes refer to the making of judicial decisions, so the English word “plead” which likewise has courtroom connotations conveys the implications of a prophet’s being a member of the divine cabinet where decisions get taken and therefore being able to issue a plea on someone’s behalf there

**20:8-13.** Abraham had got going early to check out what had happened to Sodom (19:27); in a nice inversion, Abimelek gets going briskly the morning after his dream and tells his staff about it, and they respond in the appropriate fashion.

Then (vv. 9-10) he confronts Abraham about his wrongdoing in words similar to Pharaoh’s (12:18). He speaks in elegantly poetic fashion, in the circumstances (done-wrong-wrong-doings-done-done). While the audience knows that Abimelek’s wrongdoing would imperil God’s purpose to have Sarah bear Isaac, Abimelek himself is concerned about the “great sin” of adultery as one form of sexual outrage that is “not done,” in Israel (Gen 34:7; 2 Sam 13:12) or anywhere else.[[548]](#footnote-548) He doesn’t call it a *nᵉbālāh*, an act of villainy (Gen 34:7; cf. *nābāl* in 2 Sam 13:13) but he could have done.[[549]](#footnote-549) The redundant renewed introduction to his further question in v. 10 points to Abraham’s inability to reply to this rebuke, as in 12:18-19.[[550]](#footnote-550) Abimelek thus begins by restating the second of his questions in v. 9.

Abraham’s initial response (vv. 11-12) has already been anticipatorily proved wrong by everything that we have heard in vv. 3-8, while his fear parallels his fear in 12:11-12. His then explains how he was being economical with the truth there and here. Further irony issues from this admission’s following on 19:30-38. Is he as bad as Lot? While the rules in the Torah will not mention sex between a father and a daughter, they will explicitly forbid marrying your half-sister (Lev 18:9, 11; 20:17), though 2 Sam 13:13 implies that such rules may have been more theory than practice.

Abraham’s description of being made to wander from Terah’s household (v. 13) sounds like an attempt to make excuses and blame God for the deception into which he was driven (for the verb, cf. 21:14; also Ps 107:4). Yet his reference to the “commitment” (*ḥesed*) he needed from Sarah does convey something of the magnitude of what he asked of her. There is again more than one irony in the way Abraham here picks up this word, which Lot had introduced to the Scriptures (19:19).[[551]](#footnote-551) Abraham now tells us that he had asked Sarah to show this commitment recurrently, from 12:11-12 onwards, which makes one ask whether the two occasions we know about are the only two. It fits with the way “many nomadic peoples… use their women as a means of establishing relations with the sedentary population”; the stranger establishes a relationship with the people among whom he comes by offering his sister or daughter to them, but if he has to offer his wife, he has to present her as his sister.[[552]](#footnote-552) The yet further irony is that *ḥesed* has an Aramaic homonym denoting something as shameful or disgraceful, and the single occurrence in the First Testament comes in one of the rules forbidding marriage to a half-sister (Lev 20:17).[[553]](#footnote-553) It’s as if Abraham is acknowledging that he got Sarah to undertake something shameful and disgraceful, if she is indeed his half-sister.

**20:14-16.** The sequence of events again overlaps with the one in 12:9—13:4. There Pharaoh showered gifts on Abraham to win the hand of his “sister”; here Abimelek showers the same gifts on Abraham, minus donkeys and camels. Abraham is in the one who is in the wrong; Abimelek is the one who makes amends.

Further (v. 15), whereas Pharaoh had revoked Abraham’s residence permit, Abimelek continues to demonstrate what a faithful man he is by encouraging Abraham to stay and to live in Gerar, and not merely to be a resident alien.

His additional gift of a huge amount of silver, the equivalent of cash (v. 16), extends the implicit correspondence with the earlier story: see 13:2. The 1000 silver pieces compare with the twenty for which Joseph’s brothers sold him (37:28), the fifteen that Hosea paid for his wife (Hos 3:2), the ten sheqels per year that Micah paid his Levite (Judg 17), and the four hundred sheqels that Abraham is about to pay for a burial cave (Gen 23).[[554]](#footnote-554) The gift constitutes a public compensation either for taking Sarah into his harem when she was already married or for dismissing her from it in a way that could suggest that she was somehow at fault or unsatisfactory. It means that people will no longer look down on Sarah and her staff. The expression “covering over the eyes” involves catachresis. One would usually speak of covering wrongdoing or shame so that the eyes cannot see it (e.g., Ps 32:1; Prov 12:16), or of shame covering someone (e.g., Obad 10; Mic 7:10). Abimelek will cover the implicit shame he has brought on Sarah; no one will be able to see it.[[555]](#footnote-555) He still calls Abraham his brother, which perhaps also contributes to the avoidance of any sense that shame attaches to Sarah.

**20:17-18.** The story closes with the intercession that has been in prospect but has not happened, and with the explanation of why it is needed which has been presupposed but not made explicit. God had spoken of action then prayer, which is the sequence here. It is when Abimelek has put things right that Abraham can pray for his healing. So the innocent Abimelek has to get the guilty Abraham to pray for him. “How complicated are the theological ideas that the narrative thus suggests!”[[556]](#footnote-556) What do you do if you lead someone into a moral mess? Remember that God cares about him and be prepared to pray for him. Abraham’s prayer is the first explicit intercessory prayer in the Scriptures, if we discount 18:23-32. “When our father, Abraham, prayed in this way, the knot was untied” and people could pray for one another (*GenR* 52:13). Intercession thus makes a difference. God sometimes acts in response to intercession and does things that he would otherwise not do. Yet in this case, at least, it is God who commissions the intercession, which makes for an overlap with 18:23-32. Intercession is an aspect of the way he involves his people in working out his purpose in the world, or a way of letting them be a means of bringing blessing in the world.

In due course Jesus will come and the blessing will come more systematically to the Gentile world.

At that time, therefore, both the house of Abimelech and his handmaids whom the Lord healed, will bear sons of the Church. For this is the time in which “the barren” will bear, and in which “many are the children of the desolate, more than of her who has a husband.” For the Lord opened the womb of the barren and made it fruitful, so that she bears a nation “all at once.” But also the saints cry out and say: “Lord, from fear of you we have conceived in the womb and given birth; we have produced the spirits of your salvation on the earth.” Whence also Paul likewise says, “My little children, of whom I am in labor again, until Christ be formed in you.''[[557]](#footnote-557)

At least there’s no doubt about Isaac’s paternity (v. 18).

# Genesis 21:1-21—Abraham and His Son (1)

## Overview

At last Sarah gets pregnant and has her son, though this raises the question of the relative status of Abraham’s two sons. In a sense we know the answer to the question (17:19-21). How will the divine intention be worked out? Sarah unwittingly opens up the possibility. But her action also necessitates God’s further intervention to save the life of Abraham’s firstborn. The way is also now open for Ishmael to grow towards the destiny God had announced for him, but to do so in a way that distances him definitively from the life of Abraham’s family and leaves Isaac without rival as the means of God fulfilling his promises regarding Abraham’s line.

## Translation

1But Yahweh—he[[558]](#footnote-558) attended to Śarah as he had said. Yahweh acted for Śarah as he had spoken, 2and Śarah got pregnant and gave birth to a son for Abraham in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. 3Abraham named his son, who had been born to him, to whom Śarah had given birth for him, Yiṣḥaq. 4Abraham circumcised Yiṣḥaq his son as a child of eight days, as God had ordered him, 5Abraham being a man of a hundred years when his son Yiṣḥaq was born to him. 6Śarah said,

God has made laughter for me,

since everyone who hears will laughabout me.[[559]](#footnote-559)

7And she said,

Who would have pronounced[[560]](#footnote-560) to Abraham,

“Śarah has nursed children”?—

but I’ve given birth to a son for his old age.

8The child grew and was weaned. Abraham made a big banquet on the day that Yiṣḥaq was weaned, 9but Śarah saw the son of Hagar the Miṣrite, to whom she gave birth for Abraham, making people laugh.[[561]](#footnote-561) 10She said to Abraham, “Drive out this handmaid[[562]](#footnote-562) and her son, because this handmaid’s son is not to come into possession with my son, with Yiṣḥaq.”

11The thing was very bad in Abraham’s eyes, on account of his son. 12But God said to Abraham, “It isn’t to be bad in your eyes about the boy or about your handmaid. Everything that Śarah says to you, listen to her voice, because it’s through Yiṣḥaq that offspring will be named for you. 13But the son of the handmaid: I will make him into a nation, too, because he’s your offspring.”

14Abraham started early in the morning, got bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar (he put them on her shoulder),[[563]](#footnote-563) and the child,[[564]](#footnote-564) and sent her away. She went, and wandered about in the Be’er Šeba wilderness, 15but the water from the skin came to an end. She thrust the child under one of the bushes 16and went and sat herself down at a distance, going a bowshot away,[[565]](#footnote-565) because (she said), “I will not watch[[566]](#footnote-566) the child die.”

So she sat down at a distance and lifted up her voice and cried.[[567]](#footnote-567) 17But God listened to the boy’s voice, and God’s envoy called to Hagar from the heavens and said to her, “What’s with you, Hagar? Don’t be afraid, because God has listened to the voice of the boy where he is. 18Get up, lift up the boy, take strong hold of him with your hand,[[568]](#footnote-568) because I’m going to make him into a big nation.” 19God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and got the boy to drink.

20God was with the boy. He grew up and lived in the wilderness, and became a bowman (an archer).[[569]](#footnote-569) 21He lived in the Pa’ran Wilderness. His mother got him a wife from the country of Miṣrayim.

## Interpretation

In MT, vv. 1-21 comprises the last of the three paragraphs making up 18:1—21:21. It starts by bringing the narrative back to the point it reached at the end of 13:1—17:27, the previous unit in MT. The material in between in Gen 18--20 has comprised a pair of diversions which have raised suspense; there have been so many threats to the derailing of the story.

Even if it does not derail, when will Abraham and Sarah see the fulfilment of the promise God gave in Gen 17? At last it comes. The account of Isaac’s birth in vv. 1-7 relates the event in terms that appeared in the promises and instructions in Gen 17—20, thus emphasizing that Yahweh did as he had said and that Abraham did as he had been told. Indeed, it tells us nothing beyond what Gen 17—20 trailered.[[570]](#footnote-570) The account of this event, of such importance in the context of the wider narrative, might thus seem “peculiarly understated.”[[571]](#footnote-571) Western readers would have expected something much more concrete as well as celebratory. Yet the understated nature of the account matches the accounts of other births, beginning with 4:1-2a, 25-26. Accounts of births focus on the bare facts, though may add some other piece of information such as the child’s name, with a comment on its significance. Here the expansion on the bare account works by recycling language from the preceding chapters which thereby highlights how the event is indeed a fulfilment.

But what will now happen to Hagar and Ishmael? Vv. 8-21 then work as follows:

v. 8 tells of a great celebration.

vv. 9-10 set up a problem

v. 11 makes it worse

v. 12 makes it even worse

v. 13 promises a solution: the question is, how will we get there?

v. 14a relates how Abraham takes action

vv. 14b-16a describes how things get even worse

vv. 16b-17 relates the turning point

v. 18 prescribes a short-term solution and repeats the long-term promise

v. 19 works out the short-term solution

vv. 20-21 relates the necessary beginnings to fulfilment of the long-term promise

Through the drama the narrative points to the range of feelings stirred up by the existence of Ishmael. For Sarah there is resentment that dissolves her laughter. For Abraham there is grief and reluctance. For Hagar there is the agonizing pain of a mother who thinks she is about to watch her child die (but eventually the relief and joy of seeing him thrive). For Paul in Gal 4 there is a new way of picturing the relationship of Jews who believe in Jesus and Jews who don’t. For the modern reader there is the scandal of the way Hagar is treated. For God there is the need to square the circle of commitment to Isaac and to Ishmael, to Sarah and to Hagar. For Ishmael himself, there is laughter then rejection by his father, but eventually the achieving of manhood, though among the human characters in the story, Ishmael is the one whose point of view is most unstated. He is mainly a foil for Isaac; vv. 1-21 as a whole is centrally a story about Isaac, about how Ishmael definitively leaves the stage and surrenders it to Isaac. It is a story about the elder son being “unfairly” replaced by the younger. It thus compares with the later story of Esau’s loss of the blessing to Jacob (Gen 27).

In recounting what happens to Hagar and Ishmael, this story gives even less indication that something of the kind has happened before than Gen 20 does in its account of Abraham’s passing off his wife as his sister. Traditional source criticism sees most of vv. 8-21 as the equivalent in the Elohistic Abraham story to the J version in Gen 16. There is no unanimity over the source background to vv. 1-7; the implication of its nature as constructed from material in earlier chapters is that the author of Genesis devised it to provide the necessary account of Isaac’s birth.

**21:1-7.** The formulaic account of Isaac’s birth does not diminish its “crucial character”—rather the opposite.

The event happens “as he said… as he had spoken” (v. 1). The story of Isaac’s birth begins with an emphasis on the one who brought it about. If he had not made it happen, it would not have happened; and if it had not happened, God’s promise would just have been something in the spiritual realm without purchase in the ordinary world. To take seriously “the promissory nature of faith… requires a break with our prosaic world-view which does not believe in active, world-changing words from God” and which is inclined “to romanticize the promise and remove it from the arena of historical reality” in which God takes action through people the world regards as good as dead (Heb 11:11-12).[[572]](#footnote-572) The lack of any reference to Abraham and Sarah having sex (contrast 4:1, 25; 16:4) underscores the point. And the verb “attended to” (*pāqad* , traditionally translated “visit”) emphasizes Yahweh’s special involvement in taking action to do as he had said, especially when it looks as if he is never going to do so—for his people (cf. 50:24, where again God as the subject precedes the verb) or for an individual (cf. 1 Sam 2:21, in a similar connection to the one here). The verb’s significance overlaps with that of the verb “be mindful of” (*zākar*; e.g. 8:1; 19:29), which Tg uses here.

So Sarah gets pregnant (v. 2)—the verb was used four times of Hagar in Gen 16, but it’s never been used of Sarah before. And Sarah gives birth—the verb was used three times of Hagar, but only with a negative of Sarah (16:1) or with a question mark (17:17). The pregnancy and birth happen in Abraham’s “old age,” whose reality made the idea seem so implausible (18:11-12). Gen 18—19 and Gen 20 have said that Sarah would have her baby next year. When will next year come? At last it comes, at the “set time” of which God had spoken (cf. 17:21).

Thus Abraham is able to follow God’s instructions (vv. 3-5) in naming Isaac as God said and in doing what Gen 17 said about circumcising Isaac him. In Gen 17 Abraham had protested that God’s promise would mean they were going to have a baby when he was a hundred years old and Sarah ninety, and the narrative confirms that Abraham is a hundred years old though it politely refrains from confirming Sarah’s age.

Sarah now gives her account of her response to the event (v. 6), like Eve (4:1, 25), and like Hagar when she got pregnant (16:9-13). The account contrasts with the way Abraham voices no emotional outburst.[[573]](#footnote-573) Would he be remembering that it will be several years before he can assume that Isaac will survive towards adulthood? But fathers may have less to say than mothers when children are born. First, Sarah tweaks earlier references to “laughing” (*ṣāḥaq*)*,* making links with the name God had provided for Isaac; most of the First Testament occurrences of this root come in Gen 17—21. Whereas the idea of Sarah having a baby had made both Abraham and Sarah laugh in a way that could suggest joyful wonder but could signify disillusioned scepticism (a negative or positive disbelief), now Sarah speaks of an unequivocally happy laughter. It is a laughter that everyone will share (“will laugh” is *yiṣḥāq*, the actual form of Isaac’s name), because (the narrator hints) it is significant for everyone through its relationship to God’s purpose to bring blessing to everyone. So Sarah is able to laugh again and/or to laugh in a new way compared with her laughing in Gen 18, and able to imagine other people joining in her laughter. If there had been any cynical laughter on the part of Abraham or Sarah when God gave them his promise, “it has not been held against them; it has been turned into genuine joy at this new life made possible by God. God has brought an end to cynicism and despair of the future; joyful hope fills the scene.”[[574]](#footnote-574)

Sarah continues with a reference to nursing (v. 7), the only reference in Genesis to a mother nursing (and also something of a miracle for Sarah at her age), which leads into what follows. Far from being “pointless,”[[575]](#footnote-575) her comment not only says something new over against what has preceded, but also in doing so leads into what follows in vv. 8-21.

**21:8-10.** What will now happen to Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham’s eldest son and heir presumptive?[[576]](#footnote-576) “Isaac, though the son of promise, will also cause problems, tearing this family apart.”[[577]](#footnote-577)

The narrative moves on (v. 8) from the mention of Sarah’s nursing to the account of her weaning and to a crisis at the weaning party.[[578]](#footnote-578) In traditional societies mothers nurse children for longer than is customary in the West; in 2 Macc 7:27 a mother refers to having nursed her son for three years. We don’t know whether families regularly had a weaning party (though cf. 1 Sam 1:21-24), but one might imagine Abraham’s banquet as his son’s third-birthday party. In a traditional society many children died in infancy, so such an occasion might constitute an implicit celebration that a child has survived these dangerous early years and that there was good prospect of its growing to adulthood. The party is a kind of rite of passage.[[579]](#footnote-579) And for a mother, it will be an emotional occasion.[[580]](#footnote-580)

It’s not quite explicit that the party is the context of what follows (v. 9), but family parties often cause crises and bring out latent issues. Ishmael (though he’s not named), who is now a teenager (17:25), is making people laugh (at baby Isaac?) or is laughing uproariously—the verb is the one associated with Isaac’s name, but now used in the piel. It’s as if Ishmael is pretending to be Isaac, the boy whose name links him with laughter, as if he’s still threatening to take the place that belongs to Isaac.

Sarah is therefore “furious” (v. 10).[[581]](#footnote-581) She “finds herself battling the situation she created…. Sarah’s use for Hagar expires once Sarah’s son survives, and Hagar becomes a liability to Sarah’s status.”[[582]](#footnote-582) There’s only one solution she can think of. It’s the action she unwittingly (?) brought about when Hagar was pregnant (16:6). The trouble is, Yahweh then sent Hagar back. Now Sarah wants Abraham definitively to throw the two of them out, as God threw out Adam and Cain in 3:24; 4:14 (the verb is again *gāraš* piel, which in the qal means “divorce”). Once more she does not use the names of either of them—in effect Hagar is “that woman” and Ishmael is “that boy.” Ironically, they have become diminished in her eyes (see 16:4).[[583]](#footnote-583) She will utter the name of Isaac, but not that of Ishmael. His laughter has drawn attention to the fact that he might take what Sarah sees as Isaac’s rightful place as Abraham’s heir. Are we to imagine Sarah remembering the events of a decade previously, when she got Hagar to have a baby on her behalf, or as deliberately forgetting them? She makes no reference to them. But Ishmael is Abraham’s legitimate first son whom Hagar bore “for Abram” (16:16). Yet a master can always “free” a servant, who then loses their share of the property.[[584]](#footnote-584) Ishmael is a threat to Isaac; and “only if they die in the desert will that threat be eliminated.”[[585]](#footnote-585)

**21:11-13**. For something to be bad in your eyes means you hate it, you are offended by it (cf. 28:8), though it may also imply that you think it is morally wrong (cf. 38:10; 48:17). While both connotations would be appropriate for Abraham as he thinks about throwing Ishmael out, the description here of Ishmael as “his son” (Isaac was “his son” in vv. 3, 4, 5)[[586]](#footnote-586) suggests it is his anguish that is in focus. While Hagar was center-stage in Gen 16, her son becomes center-stage in Gen 21.[[587]](#footnote-587)

God’s response to Abraham (v. 12) may also carry both connotations. Abraham’s fatherly attachment to Ishmael is proper; God is also concerned about Hagar, whom v. 11 didn’t mention.[[588]](#footnote-588) Abraham is still maybe thinking that Ishmael as his firstborn should be the one through whom God’s promise is fulfilled (cf. 17:18). “But then again this is the Bible, where the firstborn usually fare poorly.”[[589]](#footnote-589) God has determined that Isaac is the one through whom fulfilment will come, through whom Abraham’s offspring will be “named”: his genealogical line is the one that will count. Hagar and her son are discounted.[[590]](#footnote-590) There is still no suggestion that Sarah and Abraham should not have taken the action that they did. Maybe God appreciates the opportunity to give expression to that important principle that you don’t come first just because you’re born first (compare Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, Manasseh and Ephraim). But God has simply made up his mind, as Paul notes in Rom 9:7. One might think that there was no need to go along with Sarah’s extreme plan for getting Hagar and Ishmael out of the picture. But maybe the tension will never go away otherwise. Even for God, Hagar is now Abraham’s “handmaid,” not his “wife” (16:3). “The reader has not suspected that God would be on Sarah’s side, but rather on Abraham’s. But… God pursues his great historical purposes in, with, and under all headstrong acts of men.”[[591]](#footnote-591) He goes along with the dubious human plans in which the conflict issues. He does not insist on working via ideal plans and pure intentions but accepts the necessity to work through unsavoury plans and questionable decisions.

But God is still pledged to fulfilling his promise regarding Ishmael (v. 13). When he chose Isaac’s line not Ishmael’s, it was not because Isaac (or Sarah) deserved it, nor because Ishmael (or Hagar) did not; it was an aspect of God’s fulfilling his purpose that all nations may be blessed. And in this connection “Genesis depicts God both drawing lines and blurring them.”[[592]](#footnote-592) Further, in vv. 12-13 “we meet theologians who know how to detect the ways of God in the midst of the tortuous ways of human beings.”[[593]](#footnote-593) Isaac is the elected son, but Ishmael is still the treasured son.[[594]](#footnote-594) Both matter to God. “It is no unfeeling Deity who seconds Sarah's bidding to Abraham.” He is “a powerful and long lived participant in the lives of succeeding generations, who at this point…relieves Abraham of responsibility for a decision. He himself will take over now, as guardian and guarantor of the future.”[[595]](#footnote-595) Will that promise really come about? The question remains as a “narrative gap” until 25:12-18 relates its answer.[[596]](#footnote-596)

**21:14-16a.** Once again Abraham indicates his commitment to the task by starting early in the morning (cf. 19:27; 20:8). Whereas in Gen 16 he had told Sarah she could take action (and she took tough action), this time he takes action. “Sent away” (*šālaḥ* piel) is another term that can mean divorce (cf. Deut 24:1-4; TgPsJ adds that Abraham gave Hagar a divorce certificate). Abraham gives Hagar provisions, though of a basic kind. It’s hard to tell whether he is being caring or whether his provision is meager and mean. If they are in the southern Gerar, they are in or not far from the area that one could call the Beer Sheba wilderness (cf. *Jub* 16:11; and vv. 22-34). So Hagar wanders, as God had made Abraham wander (20:13), and seems not to know where she is going.

In such wilderness, when your water is finished (v. 15), you are finished, and so is your child. Hagar dumps Ishmael unceremoniously under a bush. The verb (*šālak* hiphil) is the one used for throwing Joseph into a pit (37:20, 22, 24; LXX’s verb *riptō* occurs in a similar connection in Matt 15:30),[[597]](#footnote-597) as well as recalling the one used to describe Abraham’s throwing her out: “her homophonic actions mirror Abraham’s.”[[598]](#footnote-598) She is leaving him there to die. Paradoxically, she makes a point of leaving him with some shade, seeking to make his passing a little less uncomfortable than it would be if he was just lying in the blazing sun.

The pain expressed in that act finds further expression (v. 16a) in her inability to watch him die, like Etta Place refusing to stay with Butch Cassidy and Sundance and watch them die. Yet the tension in the mother’s feelings means she cannot simply abandon him. *GenR* 53:4 says a bowshot is half-a-mile.[[599]](#footnote-599)

**21:16b-19**. Back in 16:1-2Sarah’s voice had spoken out to Abraham, he had listened, and it had worked against Hagar; and in vv. 10-12 Sarah’s voice had spoken out to Abraham and God had told him to listen. Now Hagar raises her voice as Abel’s blood had raised its voice (4:10), and she cries; her tears are the first tears in the Scriptures. The birth that brought laughter to Sarah has brought only tears to Hagar.[[600]](#footnote-600) “Hagar’s was a cry without hope,”[[601]](#footnote-601) and the story does not indicate that her cry was addressed to anyone.[[602]](#footnote-602)

But apparently the boy cries, too, and it is his voice that God listens to (v. 17)—which one may guess is fine with Hagar. Even if his mother who can do nothing cannot bear to listen, God who can do something listens. Hagar is not where the boy is; God listens where the boy is. God lives up to Ishmael’s name (though the name is still not used in this chapter). Once again God’s envoy calls to Hagar, this time from the heavens, perhaps because God commissions the envoy there immediately upon hearing the cry. The envoy does use Hagar’s name, and asks her what the problem is, which needn’t have been a rhetorical question and might rather have been one that gives Hagar the chance to speak (cf. 16:8). But on this occasion the envoy goes straight on with the exhortation/invitation given to Abraham in 15:1 (and cf. 26:24).

But Hagar needs to take action (v. 18). Twice we have been told that she sat down; the envoy tells her to get up. She has put the boy down; the envoy tells her to lift him up and grasp hold of him to help him start walking again. The envoy switches to speaking God’s actual words and thus adds further force to what he says, to reaffirm God’s commitment to keeping the promise that he gave to Abraham which the envoy now gives to Hagar herself in rather different terms. “The child, parched with thirst and given up even by its own mother, will become ‘a great people.’”[[603]](#footnote-603)

And God opens her eyes (v. 19). In Gen 16 the envoy found Hagar by a spring with a well. Here it’s not explicit whether she is again by a well or whether God specially provides one to which he then opens her eyes. Either way, she sees something different from what she was afraid of seeing (v. 16). She and her son have turned a corner.

**21:20-21.** Another key scriptural phrase appears for the first time: God was with Ishmael. Subsequently, it will apply to Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph (26:3, 28; 28:18; 31:3, 5; 39:2, 3, 21, 23). In all these cases (and in subsequent stories) the First Testament does not mean that the person to whom it applies has a subjective feeling that God is with them, nor that God makes them feel supported. It means that objectively God is active in their lives and circumstances and that God makes things happen. Thus when the scriptures say God “is with” someone, Tg often says he "is at someone's assistance,”[[604]](#footnote-604) especially when the person has the chips stacked against them. In Ishmael’s case it means the boy who has been thrown out will becomes a successful hunter like Nimrod. The description uses different terms from the ones in the promise in 16:12, but the implications are similar.

The Paran Wilderness (v. 21) stretches down well into Sinai. It would not be surprising that Hagar looked to her home country for a wife for him. But it means that “the boy’s severance from the chosen lineage is complete.”[[605]](#footnote-605) The end of Gen 21 is not reconciliation and harmony but separate flourishing.[[606]](#footnote-606) The way the story ends means that Hagar and Ishmael will both be free from Egyptian oppressors and from Hebrew discrimination.[[607]](#footnote-607) “Was it better when Hagar andIshmael lived with Abraham, Sarah and later Isaac; or was it better when they were sent away?”[[608]](#footnote-608)

## Reading Contextually

In Gal 4 Paul draws a different point from the contrast between Hagar and Sarah than the one in Gen 21. Paradoxically, boldly, and with Pauline hutzpah, Hagar stands for the Sinai covenant, servitude, and the earthly Jerusalem, Sarah for the Jerusalem above, which Paul associates with freedom and with Jesus.[[609]](#footnote-609) These things are *allēgoroumena*, they are figurative or they can be taken figuratively, he says. Either he means the story was designed as an allegory or illustration of the way God brings about the world’s salvation, or he simply means he intends to use the story that way. To ask which is correct might involve pressing on Paul a distinction he wasn’t making. All he knows is that the Holy Spirit is inspiring him to use the story in this way. The message the Holy Spirit wanted to bring to the original audience of the story was different from the one Paul wants to give on the basis of it, but the Spirit was involved in both. We do not have to outlaw Paul’s exposition on the basis of a more historical understanding; nor do we have to rule out a more historical understanding on the basis of Paul’s exposition.

Though Saint Paul, having the instinct of Gods Spirit, doth allegorize the history of Sarah and Hagar: it is therefore no warrant to every expositer and interpreter to make allegories of Scripture…: 1. Saint Pauls rare using of allegories, ought to teach such, that they also should be verie sparing. 2. Unlesse they could say of themselves, as Paul did, I think I have the spirit of God, 1 Cor. 7.4. They cannot challenge the like liberty in expounding of scripture, as S. Paul did: therefore it may be said unto them, as Christ said to his disciples you know not, what spirit you are of. Luk. 9.55. 3. Peter. to this purpose useth a good reason; It only belongeth to God, which inspired the Scriptures, perfectly to know all things, that were to come, and not only to know them, but to dispose & direct them, as it pleaseth him, wherefore he only can appoint that things formerly done… should beare a true and certaine type and figure of things afterward to bee done. Man therefore that cannot dispose of things to come, is not to make types and figures, according to his owne device.[[610]](#footnote-610)

A reading of Gen 21 that starts from a post-New Testament context finds different significance in it. TgPsJ gives the names of Ishmael’s first and second wives, Adisha (apparently a variant on Ayisha) and Fatima: they are the names of a wife and daughter of Mohammed.[[611]](#footnote-611) And a millennium or more later, “the world is filled with… descendants of Ishmael. Nearly one billion Muslims, 85 percent of whom live outside the Middle East, call Abraham father, too…. They are the descendants of God’s promise to Ishmael, which remains a contemporary theological reality. How is the other half of Abraham’s family going to relate to these brothers and sisters?”[[612]](#footnote-612) A reading of Ishmael that starts from a nineteenth-century context in the United States can take him as a heroic outcast and renegade figure, as he is for Melville.[[613]](#footnote-613) A reading of Gen 21 that starts from another twenty-first century context finds yet another significance in it. Like Gen 16, this chapter invites us to have our eyes open to women in our world who live with oppression derived from slavery, class, poverty, ethnicity, sexual and economic exploitation, homelessness, and the challenges of single-parenting.[[614]](#footnote-614) Hagar’s story draws us into empathizing with women in this position and into crying out to God, to bosses, to men, and to people of the dominant race on their behalf.

# Genesis 21:22-34—Abraham and Abimelek (2)

## Overview

There is again conflict and reconciliation between Abraham and Abimelek. At the background of a suggestion by Abimelek that he and Abraham should make a pact is a complaint by Abraham about the rights to a well at Beer Sheba. The resolution of the complaint opens up the possibility of peaceful ongoing life and worship on the part of Abraham’s people at Beer Sheba.

## Translation

22At that time Abimelek and Pikol, his army officer, said to Abraham: “God be with you[[615]](#footnote-615) in everything that you do. 23But now, swear to me here by God: if you deal falsely with me or with my offspring or with my posterity….[[616]](#footnote-616) You’re to act with me and with the country in which you’ve resided as an alien in accordance with the commitment with which I’ve acted with you.” 24Abraham said, “I myself[[617]](#footnote-617) will swear.”

25Abraham had reproved[[618]](#footnote-618) Abimelek concerning a well[[619]](#footnote-619) of water that Abimelek’s servants had seized. 26Abimelek said, “I don’t know who did this thing. You yourself didn’t tell me; I hadn’t heard of it till today.”

27So Abraham got flock and herd and gave them to Abimelek, and the two of them solemnized a pact. 28Abraham put seven ewes from the flock on their own. 29Abimelek said to Abraham, “What are these seven ewes here that you’ve put on their own?” 30He said, “The seven ewes, you are to get from my hand so it will be a witness for me that I dug this well.” 31That’s why that site was called Be’er Šeba, because the two of them swore there. 32So they solemnized a pact at Be’er Šeba, and Abimelek and Pikol, his army officer, set off and went back to the Pelištites’ country. 33He planted a tamarisk[[620]](#footnote-620) at Be’er Šeba and called out there with name Yahweh, Age-long God.

34Abraham resided as an alien in the Pelištites’ country for a long time.

## Interpretation

Vv. 22-34 form a unit in MT; they belong together over against what precedes and what follows. One effect of placing the material here is to provide some breathing space between the drama of Isaac’s birth and its aftermath and the even higher drama of the offering of Isaac.[[621]](#footnote-621) The verses focus on the relationship between Abraham and Abimelek, but they read jerkily and manifest some repetition and overlap. Vv. 22-24 relate how a formal agreement comes about on Abimelek’s initiative (which one might be inclined to link with unfinished business from Gen 20), while vv. 25-26 make a new start and focus on a grievance that Abraham brings to Abimelek. The passage then goes on to talk about two groups of sheep (vv. 27 and 28-30) and implies two explanations of the name of Beer Sheba as “Well of Seven” and “Well of an Oath.” One can in fact divide it into two smoother stories which might then have been interwoven:

vv. 22-24 Abimelek seeks an agreement vv. 25-26 Abraham seeks some resolution

v. 27 the agreement vv. 28-30 the resolution

v. 31 the naming v. 32a the naming

v. 32b Abimelek goes home v. 33 Abraham settles in Beer Sheba

If the section does combine two stories, it wouldn’t be surprising if the material comes from more than one source, but there is no consensus on how to relate it to the sources that are commonly thought to appear elsewhere in Genesis (“we are on a scholarly merry-go-round”).[[622]](#footnote-622) While the two stories might then relate to different events, their interweaving rather invites us to see the passage as bringing together stories that provide two different angles on one event, as happens a number of times in Genesis. The passage then works as follows.

1. Abimelek’s greeting “God be with you” forms an appropriate opening to the passage, not least because of the link it makes with the preceding declaration that God was with Ishmael (though in v. 20 “with” was *’et*, in v. 22 it is *‘im*).
2. Vv. 22-24: also in accordance with occasional practice in Genesis and with Western news reports, Genesis first provides a summary version of the event, on which it will go on to give more detail.
3. Vv. 25-26: the back story explains the need for the pact as seen from Abraham’s angle; the verses also make a link with 21:14-19 through the theme of the well.
4. Vv. 27-32a: the making of the pact spells out Abraham’s “Yes” in v. 24 and includes a clarifying of the well’s status. The provision of the animals relates first to the pact in general (v. 27) and then to Abraham’s claim to the well (vv. 28-30).
5. Vv. 32b-34: this clarifying opens up the possibility of peaceful and settled life for a while for Abraham, with new reason for worship (vv. 32b-34).

**21:22-24.** The reference to Abimelek, who begins what he has to say to Abraham with a polite greeting, indicates that the section picks up from Gen 20, though “that time” sounds like a reference to the period covered by Isaac’s birth and by Hagar and Ishmael’s ejection. The involvement of Phikol in the negotiations that are to follow suggests that there has been some conflict between Abraham’s people and Abimelek’s people; vv.25-26 will indicate the cause of the conflict. In the Abraham stories we sometimes get the impression of a small group of little significance in numbers and power, sometimes the impression of a group that is substantial in size and capacity. Here both impressions are mixed. Abraham is someone significant enough for Abimelek to want to make a pact with, but he is described as someone who has been a resident alien in Abimelek’s territory and is still a resident alien at the end of the story. Conversely, if we think of Gerar as the later town near Gaza, it is more impressive than if we assume it is a settlement in the Negev.

Some formalizing of the relationship between Abimelek and Abraham (v. 23) might have generally seemed a good idea, notwithstanding Abimelek’s generosity and equability (20:15), but we will shortly discover that a specific incident has exposed the need of such formalizing. Abimelek is looking for Abraham to accepting an obligation to reciprocate the commitment that Abimelek has shown to him, which Gen 20 has plentifully illustrated in the account of his handling of Abraham’s dishonesty and his inviting him to live where he liked in the territory—though Abimelek here speaks of him residing as an alien as opposed to living there. He is asking for an oath that Abraham will not deal falsely with him—which might be a snide reference to Abraham’s deceptiveness or might rather be proposing a more general honest and mutually committed relationship. A traditional way to make an oath was to say “If I do x, then may y happen to me,” with the second clause commonly left to the imagination (cf. 14:23).[[623]](#footnote-623)

Abraham agrees to Abimelek’s proposition (v. 24). In isolation, his response may seem terse,[[624]](#footnote-624) though vv. 27-28 will flesh it out.

**21:25-26**. What follows provides background to Abimelek’s request. A particular incident has suggested the need to formalize the relationship. Abraham has complained that Abimelek’s staff have seized a well. It would be a serious matter. Access to water is a key issue for shepherds; if there is no water, then sheep die—as do human beings; vv. 15-19 made the point clear just now. While the allusion to the well makes a link with vv. 15-19, the indication of some conflict implied by vv. 25-26 would explain Phikol’s involvement in these negotiations. Further, Abraham’s complaint raises from his side the question whether Abimelek’s commitment is as unequivocal as he implies in v. 22.[[625]](#footnote-625)

**21:27-32.** So it might have been Abraham’s complaint that provoked the negotiation, but the broader consideration of a pact means that Abraham makes an offer to Abimelek, perhaps as the price of an agreement between the two parties that Abimelek will withdraw from the area where the well is and thus from the Beer Sheba area.

In some way the gift of the seven ewes (vv. 28-30) and Abimelek’s acceptance of it confirms Abraham’s ownership of the well. Perhaps its implication is, “I will act as if the well belongs to you and I will buy it from you.”

The pact involving seven ewes gave double significance to the name Beer Sheba (v. 31). On one hand, *šeba‘* is the number seven; on the other, “swear” is *šāba‘* .Thus Beer Sheba’s name now becomes doubly appropriate: the well is both the “Seven Well” and the “Oath Well.” When Genesis links meaningful names with places, there is commonly no implication that the name comes into being only at this moment; it’s more that an existent name gains new significance (11:9 is a great example). So the mention of the Beer Sheba wilderness in v. 14 need not imply that this name came into use only later. While there is a spectacular well at the archaeological site at Beer Sheba, both the site and the well date from the Israelite period; that well is not the one to which Genesis refers. But there are other wells in the area[[626]](#footnote-626) and presumably this story refers to one of these other wells. The solemnizing of a pact at Beer Sheba also makes it something of a sacred place if it was not one already, and thus v. 31 likely refers to it as a worship place, a “site” (*māqôm*) and not merely a “place” in the general sense. The audience might be expected to make that assumption, given that Beer Sheba was later known as a sanctuary (e.g., Amos 5:5). Abraham’s action in v. 33 will confirm it.

The condition that Abimelek accepts (v. 32) is that his forces and staff (and his flock and herd) withdraw from the Beer Sheba area and leave it to Abraham. The agreement is a kind of repeat of the arrangement between Abraham and Lot.

**21:33-34.** The story reaches its highpoint:[[627]](#footnote-627) Abraham has secured the future of his company’s flock and secured his position in a non-aggression pact with the king. The event is a further mark of Abraham’s entering into possession of the land of promise, even though he still lives there as a resident alien.[[628]](#footnote-628) The tamarisk (which otherwise appears only in 1 Sam 22:6; 31:13) is a tall evergreen or deciduous tree that grows in rather dry areas, which would explain Abraham’s planting of this species in the Beer Sheba area. Previously he has settled near existent trees (12:6; 13:18; 14:13; 18:1); for the first time he plants one rather than building an altar (12:7, 8; 13:18), and he calls there with the name Yahweh (cf. 12:8, 13:4).[[629]](#footnote-629) But he has a new name for Yahweh (the name he would not actually know). He praises the one who is “Age-long God,” God Forever. The title *’ēl ‘ôlām* compares with *’ēl ’elyôn*, *’ēl rŏ’î*, and *’ēl šadday* (14:18; 16:13; 17:1), names that follow the pattern of Canaanite names for the top god—for Abraham, the only God. LXX and Vg have “eternal God.” The phrase could imply a recognition that this God has been God from of old (cf. *mē‘ôlām* in 6:4 and the description of the one who has been alive so long in Dan 7:9),[[630]](#footnote-630) But *‘ôlām* characteristically focuses on the future (e.g., 3:22; 6:3; 9:12, 16; 13:18; 17:7, 8, 13, 19); the title designates God as one who will always be God. A prayer for the beginning of the day, ultimately going back at least to a prayer book compiled in Paris in the eighth century (the “Gelasian Sacramentary”), asks “the all-powerful Father, the eternal God” to preserve us by his mighty power so that we may not fall into sin nor be overcome by adversity and that in all we do God may direct us to the fulfilling of his purpose. Particular experiences of God making things work out buttress our conviction that the one who is eternal in the sense of being God forever will continue to fulfil his purpose.

The concluding note (v. 34) closes off Gen 20—21 rather than relating to 21:22-33 in particular.[[631]](#footnote-631) In a broad sense, the entire Negev area is the territory of the “Philistines”—that is, the Canaanite groups who lived in that region. But it looks as if Abraham has a secure position in the Beer Sheba region.

# Genesis 22:1-19—Abraham and His Son (2)

## Overview

The Abraham story is working towards its end. Only Sarah’s death, and the finding of wife for Isaac before Abraham dies, are to follow. But “nothing prepares the audience for this dramatic turn of events in Genesis 22.”[[632]](#footnote-632) Whereas God had in effect tested Abraham by requiring him to yield to Sarah’s need to remove Ishmael from the picture of their life and future as a family, now God explicitly tests Abraham by requiring him to remove Isaac from the picture. As happened with Ishmael, when Abraham has proved himself God relents of requiring Abraham to make the ultimate sacrifice of his son.

I follow MT which makes 22:1-19 a unit and links 22:20-24 with the story of Sarah’s death and the finding of a wife for Isaac, which follow.

## Translation

1Subsequently,[[633]](#footnote-633) God tested Abraham.[[634]](#footnote-634) He said to him, “Abraham!” He said, “I’m here.”[[635]](#footnote-635) 2He said, “Please get your son, your only one,[[636]](#footnote-636) the one you love, Yiṣḥaq, take yourself to the Epiphany region,[[637]](#footnote-637) and offer him up as a burnt offering there, on one of the mountains that I will say to you.”

3So Abraham started early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and got two of his boys with him, and Yiṣḥaq his son. He cut the wood for the burnt offering, set off, and went to the site that God said to him. 4On the third day, Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the site from a distance. 5Abraham said to his boys, “You stay here with the donkey, while I and the boy will go over there and bow low,[[638]](#footnote-638) and come back to you.”

6Abraham got the wood for the burnt offering and put it on Yiṣḥaq his son, and got in his own hand the fire and the cleaver,[[639]](#footnote-639) and the two of them walked together. 7Yiṣḥaq said to Abraham his father, “Father!” He said, “I’m here, son.” He said, “Here are the fire and the wood, but where’s the sheep for the burnt offering?” 8Abraham said, “God is the one who will see for himself to the sheep for the burnt offering, son.” The two of them walked together 9and came to the site that God had said to him. There Abraham built the altar, laid out the wood, bound Yiṣḥaq his son, and placed him on the altar on top of the wood. 10Abraham put out his hand and got the cleaver to slaughter his son.

11But Yahweh’s envoy called to him from the heavens and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” He said, “I’m here.” 12He said, “Don’t put out your hand to the boy, don’t do anything to him, because now I acknowledge that you live in awe of God,[[640]](#footnote-640) and you haven’t held back your son, your only son, from me.”

13Abraham lifted his eyes and looked: there, behind,[[641]](#footnote-641) a ram had caught itself[[642]](#footnote-642) in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and got the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son. 14Abraham named that site “Yahweh Yir’eh,” so it’s said today, “On Yahweh’s mountain it’s seen to.”[[643]](#footnote-643)

15Yahweh’s envoy called to Abraham a second time from the heavens 16and said, “By myself I am swearing[[644]](#footnote-644) (Yahweh’s declaration) that since you’ve done this thing and not held back your son, your only one, 17I will really bless you and make your offspring really numerous,[[645]](#footnote-645) like the stars in the heavens and like the sand that’s on the seashore; your offspring will take possession of their opponents’ gateway. 18All the nations on the earth will bless themselves[[646]](#footnote-646) by your offspring, on account of the fact that you listened to my voice.”

19Abraham went back to his boys and they set off and went together to Be’er Šeba. Abraham lived at Be’er Šeba.

## Interpretation

The broad outline of this story corresponds to that of Gen 21:1-21 (it also overlaps with the other Hagar-Ishmael story in Gen 16). God again gives Abraham instructions regarding his son, instructions that imply the son’s death. Abraham again gets up early to set the process going. A supernatural envoy again calls from the heavens at the last minute to stop the boy dying. The boy’s parent again sees something they had not seen before.[[647]](#footnote-647)

V. 1a sets up the question which the story will deal with (what was the test, how did Abraham do, what was the result?), vv. 1b-14 provides the answer, and vv. 15-19 form a coda and conclusion. Analysing the main story can begin from the three occasions when Abraham is addressed and answers *hinnēnî*, “I’m here!” Each exchange signals a tense new development in the narrative;[[648]](#footnote-648) each response includes a key statement by Abraham.

1b invocation 7a invocation 11a invocation

1b answer 7a answer 11b answer

2 speech 7b speech 12 speech

3-6 response/action 8-10 response/action 13-14 response/action

Another way of analysing the section begins from the three key references to Isaac as “your son, your only one,” in vv. 1, 12, and 16. The first commissions the offering; the second stops the offering becoming a literal sacrifice; the third rewards the offering.

On the basis of the dominant reference to “God” as oppose to “Yahweh,” traditional source criticism sees the story as part of the Elohistic Abraham narrative (indeed as “the literary masterpiece of the Elohistic collection”),[[649]](#footnote-649) and sees vv. 15-19 as a later addition to the story.

**22:1.** The time reference is vague, but Isaac is now big enough to have a load of wood on his back so we should imagine him as at least a teenager like Ishmael in the previous chapter. He is called both a *yeled* and a *na‘ar*, words that were used of Ishmael there (and see the comment on 21:9); *na‘ar* is also the term for the two “boys” who are Abraham’s servants in vv. 5, 12, for the fighters in 14:24, and for Shechem when he has sex with Dinah in 34:19.[[650]](#footnote-650) The story is also not explicit about where Abraham and Isaac are. Gen 21:33-34 would imply that they are in Beer Sheba, but the “long time” might have come to an end by now, and v. 19 does not speak of them *returning* to Beer Sheba. “The most we know about the location of Abraham” is that “he stands before a word” in the sense that “he is addressed…. Addressed by the purposes of heaven or the pathos of earth, he is a man ready to be addressed.”[[651]](#footnote-651) For that matter, the story is vague about where God is, and about whether he comes to Abraham in a dream (as v. 3 might imply). Nor does it say whether God’s testing has some background in a heavenly consultation, as is the case in Job. *Jub 17—18* reads Gen 22 in light of Job and traces back the idea of testing Abraham to Prince Animosity (*maśṭēmāh*, cf. Hos 9:7-8; the verb *śāṭam* is suspiciously similar to *śāṭān—*it comes in Job 16:9; 30:21). The testing then vindicates God’s faith in Abraham and shames Prince Animosity. In Genesis, the vagueness of the chronology and geography makes for an appropriate framework within which to hear a story that seems to happen in a strange world.

The notion of God testing people recurs in the Scriptures (e.g., Exod 15:25; 16:4; Deut 8:2, 16; 33:8; Judg 2:22; 3:1; 1 Thess 2:4; James 1:2-5; see also 2:21).[[652]](#footnote-652) Only here does Genesis itself explicitly refer to God testing people, and it is almost the only place where the First Testament has God testing an individual,[[653]](#footnote-653) though it could have used the expression of God’s dealings with Adam and Eve and with Joseph. Arguably God has already tested Abraham lots, and not just in Gen 21: “with his land, and with famine. And… with the wealth of kings. And… with his wife, when she was taken (from him), and with circumcision. And… with Ishmael and with Hagar, his maidservant, when he sent them away” (*Jub* 17:17); this test is the tenth, according to TgNeoph (in *Jub* 18:8 Sarah’s death brings the tenth). Testing people may help them to grow, but stretching people is a different notion from testing them. God’s test is designed to uncover what is in people’s hearts (Deut 8:2) and to do so by seeing “whether someone will obey God’s command or not.”[[654]](#footnote-654)The aim of a test is for someone to discover something—perhaps the one who does the testing, perhaps the one who is tested, perhaps other people. According to Augustine, the test was designed “to prove his pious obedience, and so make it known to the world, not to God,” [[655]](#footnote-655) and the people hearing the story do discover something about Abraham, as do Abraham himself and Isaac. But Gen 22 speaks explicitly of what God will discover (cf. v. 12). Yet a better way to put it is to say that God is concerned to establish something or be sure of something—God is not starting without any assumptions about Abraham one way or the other. God tests the faithful, not the faithless (Ps 11:5); testing is a kind of compliment (cf. *GenR* 55:2-3). God does not test people in a way that might break them (1 Cor 10:13), though it would still be a good idea to pray not to be led into testing (Matt 6:13; 26:41).[[656]](#footnote-656) The test begins with God summoning Abraham like a master summoning a servant, and with Abraham responding as a servant should. Apparently God as usual makes it easy for Abraham to be sure that God is speaking to him, which is just as well in light of what follows. “There is a great emphasis in the word, ‘said,’ because God indeed made trial of Abraham’s faith… by drawing him into a contest with his [God’s] own word.”[[657]](#footnote-657) While the audience knows that what will happen is a test, however, Abraham doesn’t (like Job).[[658]](#footnote-658) “The audience knows from the beginning that the threat to Isaac is not the subject,”[[659]](#footnote-659) though this fact doesn’t mean it knows that God will not let Abraham go through with the deed.[[660]](#footnote-660) All Abraham knows is that it is a summons and a command. As God has some assumptions about Abraham, however, so Abraham has some assumptions about God. He knows God is trustworthy, if mysterious in some of the things he asks, and he knows that God has made promises to him, and he knows that God has squared a circle before, not least in 21:1-21. It is within this framework that he hears God speak.

**22:2.** So the master summons, though he does so politely, as masters often do (cf. 24:2). Indeed, perhaps his “please” gives Abraham the chance to decline with impunity.[[661]](#footnote-661) “Get your son” would not initially sound threatening; in the next verse Abraham will also “get” two of his other “boys” to accompany him and Isaac. But God’s bidding builds up to a climax which bodes ill: your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac. “Your son?”—yes. “Your only one?”—in literal terms, it is an odd description. As well as having a literal reference (cf. Judg 11:34; Jer 6:26; Amos 8:10) it carries sensitive metaphorical overtones (cf. Ps 22:20 [21]; 25:16). Is it also a tough description on God’s part? The non-peremptory command, with its “please,” hints that God recognizes the horrifying nature of his command. Yet as far as God is concerned, Ishmael does not count, and in a sense it should also be so for Abraham. Indeed, it already is so, because Ishmael is gone in literal terms; he disappeared some while ago—forever, as far as Abraham knows (but see 25:9). Likewise “whom you love”? It’s the first reference to love in the Scriptures, and one thinks about where it is leading. And finally, “Isaac”—in case there is any doubt about the identity of the one we are talking about.

Get him, says God, and “get yourself”: it’s the command that Yahweh issued in order to set Abraham on the way to Canaan (12:6); these two verses are the only places where the phrase occurs. This expression, too, would thus suggest something demanding (where might God want him to go now?) but not something horrifying. On that occasion, too, God had accumulated epithets of deepening poignancy: “from your country, from your homeland, from your father’s household” (cf. *GenR* 55:7). Now “Abraham is being asked more than to kill his son. He is being asked to give up the promised future for God’s sake, in the same way he already gave up the past when he left country and family for a land he had yet to see.”[[662]](#footnote-662) Yet perhaps the comparison is incomplete. After all, a sacrifice centrally involves not so much giving something up as consecrating something to God.[[663]](#footnote-663) But in his address to Abraham “God is clearly contradicting Himself,” when he follows up his promise in 21:12 with his command here in v. 2. “God, who formerly seemed to be his best friend, now appears to have become an enemy and a tyrant.”[[664]](#footnote-664) He seems not merely “to assail the paternal love of Abraham” but “to trample upon His own benevolence.”[[665]](#footnote-665) But Abraham’s obeying “shows that he trusts God will find a way into the future…. Whatever conflict there may be, it is up to God to resolve it, and God is up to it.”[[666]](#footnote-666) The same consideration answers the question, what would have happened if Abraham had said “No”?

The word “epiphany” (*mōriyyāh*) otherwise occurs in the First Testament only in 2 Chron 3:1 (though spelled *môriyyāh* ). There, “Epiphany Mountain” is one way of describing where the temple was built, along with the place’s identification as the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. That passage does not make a link with Abraham, while v. 2 here (with its different spelling) does not make a link between “the Epiphany region” and Jerusalem or Salem (Gen 14) or the Jebusites (10:16; 15:21)—nor does 1 Kings include such a reference. So within the First Testament the evidence is thin for identifying the geographical location of the place where Abraham is to go as the place where the temple is later built (not surprisingly, Samaritan tradition identifies the place with Mount Gerizim).[[667]](#footnote-667) Yet it may implicitly link the two in their significance (see further v. 14, where *Jub* 18:13 adds “it is Mount Zion”): the Jerusalem temple is the place where Yahweh sees to the need for sacrifice. But otherwise, we do not know where the Epiphany region was. Nor do we know why it should be the place to make an offering. God will tell Abraham exactly where to go to make the sacrifice, but the narrator will not tell us. The name is more significant than the location. It recalls the verb *rā’āh,* “see,”which recurs in the chapter: it’s the place that Abraham sees and where he sees the ram, and where God sees to things (vv. 4, 8, 13, 14).Its name is also similar to that of the Moreh Oak (12:6-7), making for anther link with that long-ago bidding to move to Canaan. While that name likely suggests “Teacher’s Oak,” it could also remind people of this verb:[[668]](#footnote-668) it too was a place where Yahweh let himself be seen (the verb came twice in 12:7) and where Abraham built his first altar, as he builds his last here.

Preceding sacrifices in Genesis were all offered on human initiative. Here for the first time God gives instructions for a sacrifice. It would be another reason for making a link between the building of the Jerusalem temple and this event. For the idea of a whole offering, see 8:20 (the only other reference in Genesis). One can hardly imagine a more sacrificial offering than to offer one’s own child in this way; it is thus a monumental sign of devotion. The idea that one owes one’s firstborn son to God will become familiar, but God will accept a substitute and then give him back (Exod 22:29 [28]; 34:20). While in one sense the audience might be shocked at the command, not least because the Torah forbade human sacrifice, in another sense it might not be shocked. Israel’s ancestors often did not live by the Torah’s rules, which had not yet been laid down. And the audience would have known of the practice of human sacrifice among other peoples in their cultural context (e.g., 2 Kings 3:27) as well as within Israel, despite what the Torah said (e.g., 2 Kings 21:6; Ps 107:34-38; Jer 7:31). Not that it was necessarily a regular practice;[[669]](#footnote-669) and the description of the event as a test implies that “there is no suggestion that the command to sacrifice the boy accords with established human custom.”[[670]](#footnote-670)

**22:3-5.** “What do you say to these things, Abraham? What kind of thoughts are stirring in your heart?” But Abraham “does not deliberate, he does not reconsider, he does not take counsel with any man, but immediately he sets out on the journey.”[[671]](#footnote-671) If “the very fact that the patriarch, who lived before the age of grace and before the Law, reached such a degree of virtue of himself from the knowledge innate in his nature is sufficient to deprive us of any excuse,”[[672]](#footnote-672) it also makes us question the premise of that statement. Abraham lives in the age of grace. But indeed there is no querying here as there was in Gen 15 and 17. Nor is there any of the other kind of questioning that appeared in Gen 18. While Genesis also says nothing directly of Abraham’s feelings regarding Yahweh’s bidding, First Testament narrative often hints at feelings by describing actions. Here “every sentence vibrates with restrained emotion, which shows how fully the author realises the tragic horror of the situation.”[[673]](#footnote-673) Every sentence is profound or subtle or enigmatic (*hintergründig*).[[674]](#footnote-674) The very detailing of Abraham’s actions may suggest his desire to postpone what is due to happen, to slow down what he has to do.[[675]](#footnote-675)

But he makes an early start (v. 3), as he did when bidden to send off Hagar and Ishmael (21:14), again indicating an unequivocal commitment to doing as the Master said. Saddling his own donkey (rather than having his boys to do it) conveys the same point. He responds to the command to take himself to the Epiphany region with the same “unquestioning obedience and steadfast loyalty” that he showed to the command to take himself to Canaan.[[676]](#footnote-676) Instead of describing his feelings (which Western readers would think essential), Genesis goes into detail about the practicalities of the action (like a movie rather than a novel). It’s not explicit why he needs to take two of his boys with him, though maybe a man of importance just would (TgPsJ nicely specifies that they are Eliezer and Ishmael). Nor is it clear why he needs to take the wood with him, though this action may relate to the fact that he doesn’t know exactly where he’s going; it would be especially odd to take all that wood into Judah (where there was plenty of wood) and/or all the way to Jerusalem. But his own cutting of the wood is another marker of his commitment to the task. The context suggests that “site” (*māqôm*) again denotes a worship place, (cf. 12:6; 13:3-4; 21:31). The journey is described “after the manner of a pilgrimage to a hilltop shrine.”[[677]](#footnote-677) It would be easier to discern the right “place” if he is to go to a worship site, but his not knowing where he is going parallels 12:1-5.

The third day (v. 4) need not imply they were traveling for three full days (see e.g., Luke 24:21). It might imply one day when Abraham hears Yahweh speak, one day when he makes preparations and sets off, and one day when he makes the offering. A literal three days is hardly time to get from Beer Sheba to Jerusalem (though enough time to get from Mamre to Jerusalem). But the expression may be comparable to “a couple of days” or “two or three days” in English (cf. Hos 6:2), or to the “third day” or the “three days” mentioned elsewhere (e.g., Gen 31:22; 40:20; 42:17-18; Exod 3:18; 15:22).[[678]](#footnote-678) The three days might be three days of testing as they are three days to think. Deliberately lifting his eyes is yet another marker of his commitment to doing what God said, of his “comment-less obedience.”[[679]](#footnote-679)

The mystery of the story increases (v. 5). Why does he leave the boys behind? Does he think they will stop him killing Isaac?[[680]](#footnote-680) Or might it seem quite natural for him to want to pray with his son on his own?[[681]](#footnote-681) What does he mean when he says that he and Isaac will come back to them? Is he prevaricating? Is he thinking that he will kill Isaac and God will resuscitate him (cf. Heb 11:17-19)? What would be the basis for that conviction? Is he second-guessing God, speaking on the basis of a hunch that God can hardly make him go through with the killing?[[682]](#footnote-682) Is he implying the conviction that “once again, a seemingly impossible situation would not be beyond God’s ability to resolve satisfactorily”? Insofar as he is, the event constitutes a testing of God’s faithfulness, even of God’s wisdom in entrusting Isaac (as the one on whom his purpose depends) to Abraham.[[683]](#footnote-683) Is Abraham perhaps “firmly convinced that He who said to him, *through Isaac shall your descendants be named*, was not lying”?[[684]](#footnote-684) Or does he not know what he means?[[685]](#footnote-685) Is it one of those things that come out of your mouth without you quite having planned it? For the audience, however, Abraham’s statement “foreshadows the good news of the story’s climax”[[686]](#footnote-686) and functions as a reassurance that everything will turn out okay.

**22:6-10.** To the horror of the audience, Abraham calmly (as far as one can tell) puts on his son’s back the wood for the fire on which his dismembered corpse will be burned (why is Abraham not taking the donkey which has presumably carried the wood so far?). “It is like one who carries his own cross on his shoulder” (*GenR* 56:3). Abraham carries the fire (that is, the flint) with which he will light the fire, and the cleaver with which he will kill his son and cut him into pieces, as one does with a burnt offering. Does he carry them to make sure that the wood doesn’t catch fire too soon, and to make sure that the cleaver doesn’t injure Isaac? The two walk together, itself an ironic or poignant or horrifying statement in light of what will follow.

“God produces… a new instrument of torture”[[687]](#footnote-687) (vv. 7-8a) as Isaac asks an obvious question. Can he really not put two and two together? What about his pointed omission of reference to the cleaver? And what does Abraham mean by his “classic” answer?[[688]](#footnote-688) Does he again not know what he means? Is it another of those things that come out of your mouth without you quite having planned it? Is he indirectly challenging God, who (he implies) is responsible for whatever happens?[[689]](#footnote-689) Or does Abraham “know” that it must be a test and that somehow God will not expect him to go through with the killing? The vocative “my father” and “my son” (to translate more literally) further deepens the enormity and pathos of the scene (ten times Gen 22 says “your/his/my son”). But for the audience, Abraham’s statement again foreshadows the good news of the story’s climax and thus functions as a reassurance that everything will turn out okay.

The disquieting story continues (vv. 8b-9). The “trusting departure” had not settled the issue of the test. “The question becomes: Will Abraham stay with the journey?”[[690]](#footnote-690) Again Genesis pictures father and son walking together. It seems that both are committed to it. Neither really knows what the journey is about but both are operating on the basis of trust and obedience. They have found reason to trust God and that trust provides them with reason to obey God. “In effect, Isaac trusts that his father’s trust is well-placed. Abraham’s trust in God has become Isaac’s trust: God will provide.”[[691]](#footnote-691) Although the “place” was likely already a worship site, for one reason or another (such as the fact that other people worshipped other so-called gods there) Abraham builds his own altar, as he did at Shechem and near Beth El (12:7-8). The altar would be constructed of stone or mudbrick, so that a fire could be built on it. Normally the offerer first kills the creature to be offered, then puts its carcase on the fire so that it goes up in smoke to God. Abraham “goes about his task… with the speechless concentration of a sleepwalker, as if thus to hold off by every possible means the fate that he has no hope of averting.”[[692]](#footnote-692) He makes the fire first, then ties Isaac up. The verb is *‘āqad*: hence the Jewish name for this event is the *Aqedah,* “the binding.” One tied an animal’s legs together before killing it.[[693]](#footnote-693) Might Isaac be twisting and trying to escape, or might Abraham imagine him trying to do so? If Isaac is big enough the carry the firewood, he is big enough to resist his centenarian father.[[694]](#footnote-694) Or does Isaac recognize what is going on and accept it? The tying up then simply means that Abraham acts in conformity to the rite of a burnt offering.[[695]](#footnote-695) The hints in the chapter that Isaac was complicit in what was happening provide a basis for Jewish interpretation’s focus on Isaac’s willingness to be sacrificed, like that of Jephtah’s daughter.[[696]](#footnote-696) Isaac’s willingness became an inspiration in the context of the threat of martyrdom,[[697]](#footnote-697) even if the story is mainly about the testing of Abraham rather than the offering or binding of Isaac.[[698]](#footnote-698) The point is similarly more explicit in the Qur’an’s equivalent story about Ishmael: “He said, ‘O my father, do what you are commanded to do. You will find me, God willing, patient.’ They both submitted.”[[699]](#footnote-699)

The moment of great sacrifice for father and son, the *kairos*,[[700]](#footnote-700) is about to arrive (v. 10).

**22:11-12**. The nature of a test is that it doesn’t go on forever; it’s a time-limited exercise with a particular aim in view. So the audience needn’t be surprised that God doesn’t intend Abraham to go through with what he asks.

At the last possible moment God intervenes (v. 11). “With what unconcern the Divine Majesty toys with death and all the power of death” as Isaac is about to die and Abraham “dies seven times over.”[[701]](#footnote-701) The divine envoy calls to Abraham from the heavens: the clause is virtually the same as the one in 21:17. The words were audible and therefore compelling, and Abraham was not fooling himself that God had changed his mind.[[702]](#footnote-702) Further, speaking from the heavens rather than making the journey to earth (cf. 28:12) perhaps suggests urgency. “If God had blinked, the boy would have died there…. In the teeth of life we seem to die, but God says no—in the teeth of death we live. If He butchers us, He makes us live.”[[703]](#footnote-703) So in the midst of life we are in death, and in the midst of death we are in life.[[704]](#footnote-704) Also paralleling 21:17, the envoy goes on to speak with God’s own “I.”[[705]](#footnote-705) Thus God calls, “Abraham,” as he did in v. 1, this time repeating the name, with a further implication of urgency; he really needs to get Abraham’s attention. And Abraham replies in the same way as he did in v. 1 and in v. 7, more coolly.

He is not to lay hands on Isaac after all (v. 12). A burnt offering involves laying one’s hand on the animal to be sacrificed, but in a different sense; we use the same verb in English, but Hebrew does not (the verb in Lev 1:4, *sāmak*, means “rest your hand”). God can terminate the test because he now “knows” something that he did not know before. In some sense God knew it beforehand, given that God’s being extends through all time. Yet “the philosophers teach that there are two kinds of knowledge, knowledge of events prior to their occurrence, and knowledge of what is presently in existence.”[[706]](#footnote-706) To know what is going to happen is different from knowing it when it has happened. Thus there is in some sense a “before” and “after” for God, a time sequence. Luther appeals to Augustine’s distinction between morning knowledge and evening knowledge,[[707]](#footnote-707) though he takes it in a different direction;[[708]](#footnote-708) Augustine himself thought that here God must mean “now I have made to be known.”[[709]](#footnote-709) But arguably Yahweh’s declaration “Now I know” taken in its regular meaning is the “pivot” of the chapter, the “climax” toward which it moves and from which the rest of it flows.[[710]](#footnote-710) Further, the common connotation of “acknowledge” carries over in the meaning of the verb (*yāda‘*) here (cf. 18:19, 21; 20:7). Yahweh acknowledges that Abraham really does live in awe of God in the sense that he is willing to do whatever God tells him to do. He could as easily have said that Abraham loves him.[[711]](#footnote-711) “This fear is love.”[[712]](#footnote-712) “God and Abraham are now bound together in both being willing to sacrifice their sons.”[[713]](#footnote-713)

**22:13-14**. Abraham lifts his eyes, as he did in v. 4, with the same attentiveness, but presumably with a different kind of expectancy. Once again the narrative’s “there” invites us to look at the scene with Abraham. Like Hagar in 21:19, he sees something that might or might not have been there before. Either way, it is again God’s provision, fulfilling the prescription Abraham made in vv. 7-8 (the word for “sheep” there is a general term that can cover other bovids, and a ram is a subset of that category). Apparently Abraham does not need instruction about what to do with it.

Yahweh has seen to things (v. 14) and Abraham can therefore say “Yahweh sees,” *yhwh yir’eh*. In effect it is the same experience as Hagar’s (16:13-14).[[714]](#footnote-714) There continues to be no direct account of Abraham’s feelings (or God’s), such as joy or relief. Here his reaction is conveyed through the report of his recollecting the conviction he expressed in v. 8: “God will see to” the sheep for an offering. It has been proved true. God has passed the test. So it becomes a conviction in the “today” of narrator and listeners that “Yahweh will see to it.” As they themselves apparently expressed it, “on Yahweh’s mountain it is seen to,” it is provided. “Yahweh’s mountain” is Sinai in Num 10:33 and apparently Mount Zion in Isa 30:29; Ps 24:3. More broadly, but etymologically, the declaration that God provides and the belief in a doctrine of pro-vidence presuppose that God sees. Jerome notes that whenever Jews are in distress and need God’s help, they say “the Lord will be seen on the mountain,” that is, “just as He had pity on Abraham, He will also have pity on us”; and the sounding of the ram’s horn is a reminder of the ram that was provided.[[715]](#footnote-715) “God not only saw to his own sacrifice, rather he still ‘sees’ in the present and future.”[[716]](#footnote-716) To say that God sees us and sees to things for us is a statement of faith often belied by experience but based on the fact that God has seen us and seen to us in spectacular ways. “The theodicy evoked by Abraham’s ascent of Mount Moriah is personal, not metaphysical. The binding of Isaac evokes the fear that sacrifice simply ends in renunciation and loss,”[[717]](#footnote-717) but it does not.

**22:15-18**. The envoy again speaks, and again speaks as if it is Yahweh himself speaking. This time he is swearing an oath, the kind of promise one makes only after serious reflection and with solemnity and an awareness that it is not the oath-taker and the recipient alone who are listening. In effect Yahweh swore oaths in Gen 15 and 17, though those chapters did not use this language. Only human beings have explicitly sworn oaths so far in Genesis (21:22-32). Now Yahweh does so. Perhaps the implication is that this was indeed “the last trial” (cf. *GenR* 56:11). The Torah will often refer back to Yahweh’s oath-taking (24:7; 50:24; Exod 13:5, 11; 32:13; 33:1, and many times in Deuteronomy). Yahweh swears “by himself” (cf. Exod 32:13; Isa 45:13; and cf. Heb 6:13-18). Human beings swear by someone or something other than themselves, which acts as a guarantor of their oath, asking God, in particular, to note the oath and to act against them in case of default. Yahweh is saying, “It is as if I will punish myself if I fail to do as I say”; or more realistically and profoundly, “If I do not keep My promises, I shall no longer be He who I am.”[[718]](#footnote-718) As if it were not enough, he adds the phrase “Yahweh’s declaration,” with which the audience will be familiar through the frequency with which it appears on the lips of prophets. It is a way of saying “this really is Yahweh speaking and therefore it really is going to happen” (Num 14:28 is the only other occurrence in the Torah). Yahweh speaks thus on the basis of Abraham’s willingness to give him the most important thing he has, the one whom Yahweh himself has designated as the key to the fulfilment of Yahweh’s own promises. Yahweh’s command had imperilled these promises; Abraham’s obedience has opened the way to their fulfilment, and even their enhancement. “You have not spared the son you so longed for…. So take back your son.”[[719]](#footnote-719)

The content of the oath (vv. 17-18) is a variant on the promises Yahweh gave on that first occasion when he said “Get yourself…” to a place that I will enable you to “see” (12:1), and on other occasions since:

I will bless you and I intend to make your name big,

and you are to become a blessing.

I intend to bless the people who bless you,

but the person who diminishes you I will curse.

All the kin-groups on the earth

will gain blessing by you. (12:2-3)

Look at the heavens, please, and count the stars, if you can count them…. That’s what your offspring will be like. (15:5)

I am Yahweh who got you out from Ur of the Kaśdites to give you this country as a possession. (15:7)

I will make your offspring really numerous,

and they won’t be able to be counted up because of the number. (16:10)

Abraham is indeed to become a big, numerous nation, and all the nations on the earth are to gain blessing by him. (18:18)

“I will bless you” becomes “I will really bless you.” The image of the sand on the seashore complements the image of the stars in the sky. The reference to possession becomes the promise that Abraham’s offspring will take possession of their opponents’ gateway. The talk of victory over people who are hostile to them corresponds to the promise that Yahweh will curse anyone who diminishes them. Whereas the gateway was literal in 19:1, here it has become a metaphor: the gateway stands for the town to which the gateway leads. And “gain blessing” becomes “bless themselves,” which suggests the idea of praying to be blessed as Abraham is blessed. Apparently there is no conflict between Abraham’s offspring taking possession of their attackers’ towns and all the nations of the earth finding blessing through these offspring: nations will choose whether they open themselves to blessing or cursing. There are further parallels with the promises regarding Ishmael in Gen 17. And it is all because Abraham heeded without question the imperious demand in vv. 1-2 (v. 18b).

The test is over (v. 19). Presumably Isaac returned too, unless he went off to study Torah (cf. TgPsJ) or to get counseling for post-traumatic stress disorder or to think about the marriage for which he is now ready (cf. Gen 24) because he has faced his own death.[[720]](#footnote-720) But this story is about Abraham,[[721]](#footnote-721) and the omission of reference to Isaac perhaps reflects Abraham’s really having given up Isaac.[[722]](#footnote-722) Everyone just goes home and life continues; Abraham, Isaac, and Sarah lived happily ever after, Josephus more or less says (*Antiquities* I, 13:4). Except that Sarah has not been mentioned, and Abraham returns to Beer Sheba, whereas Sarah dies in Hebron. “Thus the text reads as though husband and wife were never reunited in life.”[[723]](#footnote-723) As there was no direct indication of Abraham’s feelings about the original command, so there is no indication of his feelings about the deliverance, nor any indication of Isaac’s feelings, still less any indication of Sarah’s, which became another focus of Jewish reflection.[[724]](#footnote-724) Such considerations are not the story’s point. “The question whether Isaac will be sacrificed” was less important than the question “whether Abraham will stand up to the test.”[[725]](#footnote-725) The point is that Yahweh issues a command, that Abraham obeys it, and that Yahweh declares his commitment to fulfilling his promises.

## Reason, Trust, Submission

“In the earliest stages of commentary on, or allusion to, the Abraham story, it was not experienced as particularly prominent or problematic.”[[726]](#footnote-726) Calvin, for instance, gives the chapter similar space to the chapters that precede.[[727]](#footnote-727) In contrast, its omission from the *Revised Common Lectionary* perhaps reflects the extent to which in a modern Western context it seems “disturbing.”[[728]](#footnote-728)

In the eighteenth century Immanuel Kant comments on its unreasonableness in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, and defends his view in a paper arguing that the philosophy faculty in the university should be free to question the teachings of the theology faculty. “If God should really speak to a human being, the latter could still never *know* that it was God speaking. It is quite impossible for a human being to apprehend the infinite by his senses…. But in some cases the human being can be sure that the voice he hears is *not* God’s; for if the voice commands him to do something contrary to the moral law…, he must consider it an illusion.” Gen 22 would be an example.[[729]](#footnote-729)

The distinctiveness of Kant’s work emerges from the title of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*.Given that constraint, Kant could not work with the way the story belongs in the context of a relationship of trust between God and Abraham. And one cannot abstract the word from the one who spoke it.[[730]](#footnote-730) As God begins the story with some assumptions about Abraham, so Abraham has some assumptions about God. He knows God is trustworthy, if mysterious in some of the things he asks, and he knows God has made promises to him, and he knows that God has squared a circle before, not least in Gen 21. It is in this framework that he hears God speak. The more the story of Israel continues, into the story of the exodus, the people’s arrival and flourishing in Canaan, the building of the temple, the restoration of the people and rebuilding of the temple after the exile, and the deliverance from Antiochus, the more they would listen to this story in the context of their relationship with a God whom they can trust. The trustworthiness of this God is newly embodied when God gives up his own son for his people and for the world, actually doing what he did not in the end require of Abraham (Mark 1:11; Rom 8:31-32).[[731]](#footnote-731)

In the nineteenth century, Søren Kierkegaard retold the Genesis 22 story several times in ways that begin by bringing it to life but go on to make it a different story.[[732]](#footnote-732) In his first version Isaac pleads with Abraham for his life and Abraham urges him to recognize that really he himself is an idolater. “Do you think it is God’s command? No, it is my desire.” Then Abraham thanks God that Isaac believes him to be a monster rather than that he should lose faith in God. In another version he asks God for forgiveness that he was willing to sacrifice his son. In another version Isaac sees what his father is prepared to do and “loses the faith.” Yet another version marvels at Abraham’s having kept the faith all those years of living with God’s implausible promise but then experiencing God apparently mocking him by fulfilling the promise and subsequently requiring him to slay Isaac. “But Abraham had faith and did not doubt; he believed the preposterous.” Otherwise he would have offered himself to God instead of his son. But “he did not pray for himself” as he had for Sodom and Gomorrah. Many a father has despaired of the future through losing a child; Abraham was bidden to take his own child’s life, and he readily agreed. “There were countless generations who knew the story of Abraham by heart…, but how many did it render sleepless?” One can understand Hegel, but not Abraham, and the Abraham story presupposes “a teleological suspension of the ethical.” Kierkegaard speaks of God testing Abraham’s faith, his trust in him. Yet there is no reference to faith or trust in Gen 22. It’s obedience that’s the issue. Arguably, Abraham passed the faith test back in Gen 15. In the twentieth century, Jacques Derrida entered into conversation with Kierkegaard in *The Gift of Death*. Like Kierkegaard, he is concerned with the question whether there is such a thing as a selfless, disinterested act; paradoxically, Abraham’s willingness to offer his son’s life (as opposed to his own) is such an act, because he is sacrificing his future. But it is a challenge unique to him. It cannot be turned into an ethical generalization. It’s a command not a law.[[733]](#footnote-733)

In the twentieth century child abuse provided another focus for concern about Gen 22.[[734]](#footnote-734) “What kind of God would command the sacrifice of a child?”[[735]](#footnote-735) Here one difficulty arises from the assumption that Isaac was a child, whereas we have seen that he seems to have been at least a teenager, and not someone capable of being physically overwhelmed by his centenarian father.[[736]](#footnote-736) But anyway, Isaac is no ordinary child, and Abraham’s testing is a “patriarchal temptation” which is “non-repeatable within the Bible.”[[737]](#footnote-737) Gen 22 becomes a problem when taken out of context. Yet historically, Gen 22 has not led to a rash of child sacrifice, as Deut 7 has not led to a rash of genocide. The picture of Isaac as a young man fits the story’s retellings in the context of the First World War and the Vietnam War, by Wilfred Owen in “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young” and by Leonard Cohen in “Story of Isaac.” They treat the story as an asset rather than a liability in connection with concern about abuse. After all, Abraham was lowly or submissive enough to give up the idea of killing Isaac, unlike the people who sent off their nations’ offspring to their death in those wars.

When God says that Abraham has passed the test, he does not refer to his having shown faith or trust but to his having shown that he was in awe of God.[[738]](#footnote-738) Awe of God does not mean a sense of being overwhelmed in one’s inner being by the awesome mystery of the supernatural God—or it does not mean simply that sense. It means being submissive to God. It means “moral restraint out of respect for God.”[[739]](#footnote-739) And it means Abraham not loving Isaac more than he loves God (in the sense of being committed to God). Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son, his future, his eternity. But the story then provokes the question, “Are you never prepared—ever—to do so?... Abraham's readiness was in response to the God who is Ultimate Reality, who calls us into being and gives meaning to our existence. When and where, to the call of what authority, in loyalty to what cause, in the name of what values, is it your wont to sacrifice your children—and yourself?"[[740]](#footnote-740) “Through the aqedah, Abraham surrenders his beloved son to the God who made his miraculous conception possible,” though then “the divine father exercises his prerogative to decline the offering he demanded.”[[741]](#footnote-741) Thus “Abraham loved Isaac his son, the text says, but he placed the love of God before love of the flesh…. Unless you shall be obedient to all the commands, even the more difficult ones, unless you shall offer sacrifice and show that you place neither father nor mother nor sons before God, you will not know that you fear God nor will it be said of you: "Now I know that you fear God.”[[742]](#footnote-742)

# Genesis 22:20—23:20—Birth and Death

## Overview

“With the sacrifice of Isaac the test of Abraham's faith was now complete, and the purpose of his divine calling answered: the history of his life, therefore, now hastens to its termination.”[[743]](#footnote-743) First there is some news of his wider extended family which (among other things) trailers the existence of a young woman called Rebekah who will become important in Gen 24. Then there is news of Sarah’s death, which leads into Abraham’s acquisition of a final resting place for her and for himself and for Isaac, Rebekah, Leah, and Jacob.

## Translation

22:20Subsequently,[[744]](#footnote-744) it was told to Abraham: “There, Milkah has given birth to children for your brother Nahor, too: 21Uṣ his firstborn, Buz his brother, Qemu’el the father of Aram, 22Kesed, Hazo, Pildaš, Yidlap, and Betu’el; 23and Betu’el has fathered Ribqah.” To these eight Milkah gave birth for Nahor, Abraham’s brother. 24His secondary wife, her name was Re’umah, also gave birth to Tebah, Gaham, Tahaš, and Ma’akah.

23:1Sarah’s lifetime was 127 years (the years of Sarah’s life). 2Sarah died at Arba Township (i.e., Hebron) in the country of Kena‘an. Abraham came to lament for Sarah and cry for her. 3Then Abraham set off from being in the presence of his dead and spoke to the Ḥētites:[[745]](#footnote-745) 4”I’m a resident alien, a settler, living with you. Give me a burial holding with you, so I may bury my dead away from my presence.” 5The Ḥētites answered Abraham, saying to him,[[746]](#footnote-746) 6“Listen to us, sir. You’re an almighty leader[[747]](#footnote-747) among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our burial places. None of us would withhold his burial place from you for burying your dead.”

7Abraham got up and bowed low to the people of the country, to the Ḥētites, 8and spoke with them: “If it’s your desire that I should bury my dead away from my presence, listen to me and meet with Epron ben Ṣohar for me, 9so he may give me the Double Cave[[748]](#footnote-748) which is his and which is at the edge of his field. For the full silver may he give it to me among you as a burial holding.” 10Epron was sitting among the Ḥētites.

Epron the Ḥiṭṭite[[749]](#footnote-749) answered Abraham in the ears of the Ḥētites, of all who came to the town gateway: 11“No, sir, listen to me. The field – I am giving[[750]](#footnote-750) it to you, and the cave that’s in it. I am giving it to you, before the eyes of the members of my people I am giving it to you. Bury your dead.” 12Abraham bowed low before the people of the country 13and spoke with Epron in the ears of the people of the country: “But if you yourself would please listen to me: I am giving you the silver for the field. Get it from me, so I may bury my dead there.” 14Epron answered Abraham, 15“Sir, listen to me: land worth 400 sheqels – between me and you, what’s that? Your dead: bury her.” 16Abraham listened to Epron.

So Abraham weighed out to Epron the silver that he had spoken of in the ears of the Ḥētites, 400 sheqels of silver, as current for the merchants.[[751]](#footnote-751) 17And Epron’s field which is at Double, which is close to Mamre (the field and the cave that was in it and all the trees that were in the field, which were in all its border around) passed[[752]](#footnote-752) 18to Abraham as his acquisition before the eyes of the Ḥētites, of all who had come to the town gateway.

19After this Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave in the field at Double, close to Mamre (i.e., Hebron) in the country of Canaan. 20So the field and the cave that was in it passed to Abraham as a burial holding, from the Ḥētites.

## Interpretation

MT makes 22:20-24 and 23:1-20 the first two paragraphs of the three that comprise a unit, 22:20—24:67; for convenience I deal here with these first two together. The account of Nahor’s offspring with its “Milkah, too” follows on from the account in Gen 21 of Sarah’s having her baby. It also prepares the way for the story about getting a wife for Isaac, which will be required if the reformulated promises in 22:15-18 are to find fulfillment; the wife will turn out to be Milkah’s daughter.

The story in Gen 23 starts from a question Abraham has to face. When Sarah dies, it is an occasion of grief for Abraham, and he has to express his grief (vv. 1-2). But the main question in Gen 23 is different from the one that Western readers might assume. “It is remarkable that Moses, who relates the death of Sarah in a single word, uses so many in describing her burial.”[[753]](#footnote-753) The question that preoccupies Abraham is, where can Sarah be buried? Whereas many members of his clan must have died over the decades since his move to Canaan, Genesis raises the question at this point, in connection with Sarah, because of her importance to the plot of the bigger First Testament story and thus her importance to the audience. What happened to their great original mother? Actually they knew the answer—they knew her burial place near Hebron. How did she come to get buried there? The route from the question Abraham has to face to the resolution the audience thus knows must inevitably be tricky. Abraham does not possess land in Canaan or, therefore, possess a proper burial place which could be a secure final resting place for Sarah. Somehow he must acquire one from the local people. What will the Hittites’ attitude to him be? He knows a spot that would be appropriate. Will its owner be prepared to sell? How much will he ask?

According to traditional source-criticism, Gen 22:20-24 comes from the J version of Abraham’s story and Gen 23 from the P version.

**22:20-24**. Meanwhile back in Harran…. Although Abraham was commissioned to leave this family (see 11:27-29), it is still his family. Milkah and Nahor’s son Betu’el and his granddaughter Rebekah will have continuing importance for him (see 24:15); there is also a neat link between the name of Nahor’s grandson Aram and the town where the family lives (24:10). While one might imagine the main list deriving from a report brought to Abraham, that one significant reference to a grandson suggests that the list is not simply a verbatim account of such a report, and the note about one of his sons and his daughter (v. 23a) confirms that point. More likely the information about members of the family would derive from the expedition back to Aram Naharaim related in Gen 24. Here, it trailers that story, though the interposition of the story of Sarah’s death holds us in suspense for a while.

Maybe it is significant that there are twelve names, as in 17:20; 25:13-16, 35:22-26,[[754]](#footnote-754) though those passages note the number twelve and their lists are more straightforward. Outside Gen 24, the names that are known from elsewhere are the names of towns or peoples—as are Nahor and Aram. They link with various parts of Arabia and Mesopotamia. Uṣ as a place name comes in e.g., 10:23; Jer 25:20; Lam 4:21; and Job. Buz appears in Jer 25:23; and Job. The parallels with Job and his testing are noteworthy in the context of 22:1-19 with its account of a test (cf. *GenR* 57). Someone called Keśed would be the ancestor of the Kaśdites: see 11:28. Ma’akah comes in Josh 12:5. The passage is thus a throwback to the lists in Gen 10—11 where names refer both to individuals and to places or peoples.

A secondary wife (*pîlegeš*) is not a concubine in the sense of a mistress or a woman with whom a man lives without being legally married to her, but a woman who is a legal wife but of a lower status and with fewer rights than a “primary wife”— for instance, that her children have no inheritance rights (see 25:1-6).

**23:1-2**. The Abraham narrative continues to work its way towards its conclusion. Jewish interpretation was struck by the absence of Sarah from Gen 22 and by this transition to the account of her death, and it filled in the dots imaginatively: when Sarah heard that Isaac was going to be sacrificed, she died of shock.[[755]](#footnote-755) As Genesis tells the story, another thirty-seven years have passed since Sarah gave birth to Isaac at the age of 90, which implies up to a decade since the event in Gen 22.

Sarah’s dying in Hebron (v. 2) raises the question whether she was living in the clan settlement at Mamre while Abraham and Isaac and other members of their staff were shepherding in the Beer Sheba area. Women, after all, could have full lives and responsibilities of their own; marriage was a partnership (see Prov 31:10-31). It would explain the sense in which Abraham “came” to mourn Sarah.[[756]](#footnote-756) The alternative inference is that sometime between the events in Gen 22 and Gen 23 the entire settlement has moved (cf. *Jub* 19:1). Arba Township (or Four Township)[[757]](#footnote-757) is another pre-Israelite name for Hebron (for Arba, see Josh 14:15; 15:13); it would be the name the Hittites would use. Genesis remarks that Sarah thus dies “in Canaan”; the comment is “unnecessary” as a purely geographical note[[758]](#footnote-758) but it does indicate that she died in the promised land. She is the first person to be mourned in the First Testament, which befits her importance; Jacob is the only other person in Genesis to be mourned (50:10), and the account of that mourning shows what a significant public event it was. By implication, Abraham’s mourning was more personal to him, though it would still be outwardly expressed and thus public (see Ezekiel’s account of mourning for his wife in Ezek 24:16-17; further 2 Sam 1:11-12; 3:31; Jer 4:8; 16:5-7; 49:3; Joel 1:13; Mic 1:8). Lamenting suggests the use of words, which are accompanied by tears. The reference to mourning here may imply that “Abraham fulfilled all righteousness in relation to Sarah so that now only the burial itself remains,”[[759]](#footnote-759) but “lament and cry” constitute a most brief account of this mourning. “It is not the actual theme of Gen 23.”[[760]](#footnote-760) While the mention of mourning is striking after the many references to death without reference to mourning in Gen 1—22, the mention turns out to be just background to the focus on a burial place.

**23:3-6**. Shepherding peoples might not have fixed burial grounds, but Abraham wants one. What happens to the family’s bodies matters. It matters on the assumption that death is the end; it also matters when you know that their bodies are to be raised to new life. Abraham was unconcerned about a place to sleep when he and Sarah and Isaac didn’t need one; now things have changed.[[761]](#footnote-761) His concern compares with the later desire of Jacob and Joseph, a wish to be buried in Canaan, the land Yahweh promised to give Abraham and his family.

For practical reasons Abraham will need to act quickly to make burial arrangements (v. 3), and he thus gets going to talk to the Hittite men at the Hebron gateway; it need not imply that proper mourning is over. The Hittites are apparently a subgroup of Canaanites (cf. v. 1; and 10:15), the particular group that lives in the Hebron area, as the Jebusites live in the Jerusalem area. They appear most often in lists of peoples living in Canaan before Israel was there (e.g., Exod 3:8, 17; 13:5). A great Hittite empire spread through eastern Turkey and northern Syria in the second millennium, but it did not extend this far south; these Hittites are either a subgroup of that empire who have somehow moved into Canaan, or a different group with a similar name. Abraham’s friendly negotiation with them stands in some contrast with the promise that his descendants are going to take over their land (15:20).[[762]](#footnote-762)

Abraham of course is only a “resident alien” or “settler” in Canaan (v. 4). He combines two terms derived from verbs that have become familiar in Genesis (e.g., 19:9; 20:1; 21:23, 34; and 13:12; 13:18; 16:3; 19:29; 20:15). A “resident alien” (*gēr*; cf. 15:13)is someone who does not belong by right in a place; a “settler” (*tûšāb*) is someone who is nevertheless staying there semi-permanently. Added to the first noun, the second term would form the basis of Abraham’s plea. For the audience, Abraham’s asking for a “holding” (*’ăḥuzzāh*)would be a significant request. God has already promised the country of Canaan to Israel as its holding (17:8) and within this holding each family later had its own holding (e.g., Lev 25). It is within this prospective holding which Abraham and his audience know about (but the Hittites don’t) that Abraham asks for somewhere to bury Sarah. He implies that the Hittites will share the assumption that corpses are taboo and that thus people cannot be buried next to living quarters. In asking that the Hittites may “give” him some land, he speaks euphemistically; he means “give it for money.”

The Hittites are able to exploit the indirectness of Abraham’s request (vv. 5-6). He has set going a set of “hard-nosed” but polite negotiations,[[763]](#footnote-763) a “dance.”[[764]](#footnote-764) The Hitttes are thus effusive, with a traditional society’s gracious and generous courtesy. Their reply presupposes that they indeed have burial places separate from their settlement, for the same reason as Abraham wants one separate from his encampment. Even if he is legally a resident alien or settler, they are prepared to speak of him a leader (*nāśî’*; cf. 17:20; 25:6)in that he is the head of his clan. They are thus treating him as someone of equal status to them (cf. the description of Shechem in 34:2). Yet their effusiveness conceals something by way of refusal, almost a “Not on your life.”[[765]](#footnote-765) Abraham has perhaps given too much away in drawing attention to his being a resident alien or settler. He wants a burial holding; but even as the head of a clan, how could a resident alien come to possess an actual holding? They agree only that he can have a place in one of their places. It is unlikely that they mean he can bury Sarah in one of their family tombs;[[766]](#footnote-766) a family tomb is a family tomb. Perhaps they mean he can have the use of one of the caves in the area where they have their tombs, without any implication that he owns it. Might they assume that he will take her bones with him when he moves on (cf. 50:25)?[[767]](#footnote-767)

**23:7-10a.** Abraham is not put off and he knows how to deal with the situation. So far, he and the Hittites have been sitting. Now Abraham gets up as the preliminary to bowing low (the verb that came in 22:5) to signify deference. Genesis now speaks of the Hittites as “the people of the country”; v. 10 will refer to “all who came to the town gateway,” and v. 11 to “the members [*bᵉnê*]of my people.” All these terms will refer to the citizenry of Arba Township as a whole, in the sense that “citizenry” would have had before the twentieth century in the United States—that is, it will refer to as many of the adult men as care or happen to be gathered at the town gateway. To this extent the government of Arba Township is democratic (Genesis makes no reference to a king), though not elected, and it is these people who have power to make decisions on matters concerning the community as a whole, such as questions about land.[[768]](#footnote-768)

In reality Abraham knows exactly what he wants (v. 8). He has a specific piece of Hittite land in mind, not too far away from his settlement at Mamre (see v. 17). But he needs the leaders to meet (*pāga‘*) with Ephron for him in the sense of mediating between them, to supervise his negotiation with Ephron. The names of Ephron and his father are Semitic (cf. 46:10; Josh 15:9), which supports the idea that these Hittites are nothing to do with the Hittites to the far north.

A cave (v. 9) is the preferred location for a burial. While people could be buried in graves dug into the earth in the Western fashion, this was a second-class provision, unnecessary in a mountainous are where there were many caves. The ideal thing was a location where the entire family could be together in death as they were together in life. It was easy to adapt a cave to this end. Apparently Abraham has spotted one that would be okay, on the edge of a plot of land that Ephron farmed, and he offers to pay the market value. His mention of the price at the beginning of v. 9b (between occurrences of the polite verb ”give”!) makes clear that he is talking about acquiring ownership of the cave, not just finding a spot for Sarah in a burial place he doesn’t own. His reference to the edge of the plot emphasizes that he is not seeking to take over a huge tract of Hittite land. To Israelites, his coming into full possession of just a little bit of land in Canaan would nevertheless be important. Yet they might be brought up short by the idea of buying land. In Israel, in theory it was impossible to buy and sell land because it belonged to God and to the family, though Israelites had ways of getting around this rule.[[769]](#footnote-769) The audience would understand the Hittites’ reluctance to sell land and might even see it as something of a miracle that Abraham succeeded in buying some.

Ephron’s ears prick as he sits among the men (v. 10a). As far as we know this is the first he has heard of Abraham’s plan.

**23:10b-16aα.** Whatever hesitations the Hittite assembly might have had, for one reason or another Ephron is prepared not to be held back by them. He speaks in the hearing of the citizenry (now differently described) because they do have the right to object to the conducting of such a transaction

His reply (v. 11) works with conventions of negotiation in the culture, though it is of course difficult for us to know exactly what these conventions were.[[770]](#footnote-770) Initially he may operate with an upside down version of the way merchants may quote a price much higher than the one they are prepared to accept. Ephron says he is prepared simply to give Abraham the cave, and not only the cave but the field it’s in. Perhaps Abraham had understated his request, and both sides knew that he would need more than the cave, or Ephron may be signaling that he will only sell the cave along with the field, or that he intends no more to give over full ownership of the land than the other Hittite leaders were prepared to do—he simply means he is giving Abraham burial space. If he makes a gift, he can then reclaim it.[[771]](#footnote-771)

Abraham replies courteously but firmly (vv. 12-13) that he will of course give Ephron the value of the field. Paying for it will establish his permanent ownership. It will also mean he is no more in debt to the Hittites than he wanted to be to the Sodomites (14:22-23).[[772]](#footnote-772) Metaphorically, perhaps literally, he is holding out the silver in his hand—money not having been invented, silver is the medium of exchange. He has come with his checkbook. Ephron just has to decide how much silver to take, what check to ask Abraham to write.

Ephron discretely names his price (vv. 14-16aα). Perhaps he names an exorbitant amount, in the manner of a merchant, thinking it may put Abraham off or expecting Abraham to offer him rather less than he asks. David bought Araunah’s threshing floor for fifty sheqels, Omri bought enough land to build a whole town for two talents or 6000 sheqels, and Jeremiah paid seventeen sheqels for a field (2 Sam 24:24; 1 Kings 16:24; Jer 32:9).[[773]](#footnote-773) If so, Ephron’s ploy fails. Abraham will pay the asking price.

**23:16aβ-18**. The plaza at the town gateway is also the market, so weights would readily be available for Abraham to measure out the silver in accordance with the sheqel weight that the merchants used (the audience would likely assume a sheqel that weighed about four ounces). Evidently the town has more than one system of weights and measures, rather in the way that a litre or a gallon has different significance within different Western cultures, and as banks set the value of a currency differently according to whether you are buying or selling. In Israel, the sanctuary sheqel was different from the market sheqel (see e. g., Exod 30).

So the field becomes Abraham’s his legal property (v. 18). The polite language of “giving” gives way to talk of “acquisition” (*miqneh*) from the verb that commonly suggests purchase.[[774]](#footnote-774)The Hittite assembly has been there to witness the transaction, so there can be no dispute over it.

**23:19-20**. The question raised by vv. 1-2 (what is Abraham to do about burying Sarah) is solved. The two verses comprise a double conclusion to vv. 1-18. “Sarah’s burial in the promised land plants her in the future of the covenant.”[[775]](#footnote-775) And “God’s word to Abraham that he would possess the land was fulfilled.”[[776]](#footnote-776) Accepting the validity of the local peoples’ religion didn’t undermine the importance of gaining possession of land in Canaan.[[777]](#footnote-777) Yet whereas God’s activity was prominent in 22:1-19 and will be prominent in the testimony of Abraham’s servant in Gen 24, God is unmentioned in 22:20—23:20 except in the figure of speech in 23:6. “In the life of the people of God, so-called non-theological factors frequently play a role of a theological kind.”[[778]](#footnote-778)

# Genesis 24:1-67—A Wife for Isaac

## Overview

More years have passed, Abraham is getting old, and Isaac needs a wife if Yahweh’s promises to Abraham are to find fulfillment. Alongside the question of somewhere for the ancestors to rest in peace is the question of someone for Isaac to marry, so that he may indeed become the ancestor of many nations. And in consequence of Sarah’s death, there is need of someone to take her place as matriarch of the family. So how did Abraham find a wife for Isaac? How did Rebekah, whom we know to have been born as a member of the extended family that Abraham had left behind (22:20-24), come to be Isaac’s wife and Sarah’s successor? The answer is that Abraham commissions his senior servant to go and find the right wife, and the servant experiences Yahweh’s extraordinary providence in doing so. The story relates how this happens and how the question gets resolved, by answering a series of sub-questions. Where should the matchmaker look (vv. 1-4)? What if the girl won’t agree to the marriage (vv. 5-9)? How will the servant recognize the right girl (vv. 10-14)? When he thinks he has found her, what family does she belong to and can he gain an entrée to it (vv. 22-28)? Will it be willing for her to go to marry Abraham’s son (vv. 29-53a)? Will she be willing to go (vv. 53b-61a)? When all the questions have been satisfactorily answered, the story can hasten to its happy conclusion (vv. 61b-67).

## Translation

1Abraham was a senior, going on in years, and Yahweh had blessed Abraham in every way. 2Abraham said to his senior servant in his household, who ruled over everything that he had, “Please put your hand under my thigh, 3and I’ll get you to swear by Yahweh the God of the heavens and the God of the earth that you won’t get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Kena‘anites among whom I’m living, 4because it’s to my country, to my homeland, that you’re to go and get a wife for my son, for Yiṣḥaq.”

5The servant said to him, “Maybe the woman won’t be willing to follow me to this country. Should I actually get your son to go back[[779]](#footnote-779) to the country that you left?” 6Abraham said to him, “Take care that you don’t get my son to go back there. 7Yahweh, the God of the heavens, who got me from my father’s household and from the country that was my homeland and spoke to me and swore to me: ‘To your offspring I will give this country’ – he will send his envoy before you and you will get a wife for my son from there. 8If the woman’s not willing to follow you, you’ll be free from this oath to me. Only my son—don’t get him to go back there.” 9The servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his lord and swore to him concerning this thing.

10The servant got ten camels from his lord’s camels and went, with all the good things belonging to his lord in his possession. He set off and went to Aram Two-rivers, to Nahor’s town. 11He got the camels to kneel outside the town at the water well, at evening time, at the time when the women who draw water go out. 12He said, “Yahweh, God of my lord Abraham, please make it happen for me today. Act with commitment to my lord Abraham. 13Here, I’m standing near the water spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are going out to draw water. 14May the girl to whom I say ‘Please tip your pitcher so I can drink,’ and she says ‘Drink, and I’ll also water your camels,’—may it be her that you’ve decided on for your servant, for Yiṣḥaq. By this I will acknowledge that you have acted with commitment to my lord.”

15Before he’d finished speaking, there was Ribqah, who had been born to Betu’el ben Milkah, wife of Nahor, Abraham’s brother, coming out with her pitcher on her shoulder. 16The girl was very good-looking, a young woman that no one had had been with.[[780]](#footnote-780) She went down to the spring, filled her pitcher, and went up. 17The servant ran to meet her and said, “Please let me drink down a little water from your pitcher.” 18She said, “Drink, sir,” and hurried and lowered her pitcher onto her hand and let him drink. 19She finished letting him drink, and said, “I’ll draw water for your camels as well, till they’ve finished drinking.” 20She hurried and emptied her pitcher into the trough, ran back to the well to draw, and drew for all his camels, 21while the man was looking at her, staying quiet, to know whether or not Yahweh had made his journey successful.

22When the camels had finished drinking, the man got a gold ring (its weight a half-sheqel) and two gold bracelets for her hands (their weight ten sheqels). 23He said, “Whose daughter are you? Please tell me, is there room at your father’s house for us to stay the night?” 24She said to him, “I’m the daughter of Betu’el ben Milkah, to whom she gave birth for Nahor.” 25And she said to him, “There’s plenty of both straw and fodder with us, and also a place to stay the night.” 26The man bent his head, bowed low to Yahweh, 27and said, “Yahweh the God of my lord Abraham be blessed, who hasn’t abandoned his commitment and his truthfulness with my lord. I myself – Yahweh has led me on the way to the house of my lord’s brothers!”[[781]](#footnote-781) 28The girl ran and told her mother’s household all these actual things.

29Now Ribqah[[782]](#footnote-782) had a brother; his name was Laban. Laban ran out to the spring to the man. 30When he saw the ring, and the bracelets on his sister’s hands, and heard the words of his sister Ribqah, “This is how the man spoke to me,” he came to the man. There he was, standing near the camels, near the spring. 31He said, “Come in, you who are blessed by Yahweh. Why do you stand outside when I’ve cleared the house and a place for the camels?” 32So the man came into the house. He unharnessed[[783]](#footnote-783) the camels, and gave straw and fodder to the camels, and water to wash his feet and the feet of the men who were with him. 33Something to eat was set[[784]](#footnote-784) before him, but he said, “I won’t eat until I’ve spoken my words.” So he said, “Speak.”

34He said, “I am Abraham’s servant. 35In that Yahweh has greatly blessed my lord, he’s become big. He’s given him flock and herd, silver and gold, servants and maidservants, camels and donkeys. 36Sarah, my lord’s wife, gave birth to a son for my lord in her[[785]](#footnote-785) old age, and he’s given him everything that he has. 37My lord got me to swear, saying ‘You will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Kena‘anites among whom I’m living in their country. 38No, you’re to go to my father’s household, to my kin-group, and get a wife for my son.’

39I said to my lord, ‘Maybe the woman won’t follow me.’ 40He said to me, ‘Yahweh, before whom I’ve walked about– he will send his envoy with you and he will make your journey successful. You will get a wife for my son from my kin-group. 41Then you will be free from my imprecation when you come to my kin-group, if they don’t give her to you. You’ll be free from my imprecation.’

42So I came today to the spring, and said, ‘Yahweh, God of my lord Abraham: if you could please be one who makes my journey that I’m going on successful! 43Here, I’m standing by the water spring. May the young lady who goes out to draw and to whom I say “Please let me drink a little water from your pitcher,” 44and she says to me “Drink, and I’ll also draw for your camels,” may she be the woman that Yahweh has decided on for my lord’s son.’

45I—before I’d finished speaking in my mind, there was Ribqah going out with her pitcher on her shoulder. She went down to the spring and drew. I said to her, ‘Please give me a drink.’ 46She hurried and lowered her pitcher from on her shoulder and said, ‘Drink, and I’ll water your camels as well.’ So I drank, and she watered the camels as well. 47I asked her, ‘Whose daughter are you?’ and she said, ‘The daughter of Betu’el ben Nahor, to whom Milkah gave birth for him.’ I put the ring on her nose and the bracelets on her hands, 48and I bent my head and bowed low to Yahweh and blessed Yahweh the God of my lord Abraham, who had led me on a true way to get the daughter of my lord’s brother[[786]](#footnote-786) for his son.

49So now: if you’re going to act with commitment and truthfulness to my lord, tell me. And if not, tell me, so I may turn my face to the right or to the left.”

50Laban and Betu’el answered,[[787]](#footnote-787) ‘It’s from Yahweh that the thing has issued. We can’t speak to you bad or good. 51Here is Ribqah before you. Get her and go, so she can be a wife for your lord’s son, as Yahweh has said.” 52When Abraham’s servant heard their words, he bowed low to the ground before Yahweh. 53The servant brought out objects of silver and objects of gold, and clothes, and gave them to Ribqah, and he gave choice things[[788]](#footnote-788) to her brother and to her mother. 54They ate and drank, he and the men who were with him, and stayed the night.

They got up in the morning, and he said, “Send me off to my lord.” 55Her brother and her mother said, “The girl should stay with us for some days—say ten.[[789]](#footnote-789) Afterwards, she can go.” 56He said to them, “Don’t make me delay, in that Yahweh has made my journey successful. Send me off so I can go to my lord.” 57They said, “Let’s call the girl and ask for her bidding.” 58They called Ribqah and said to her, “Will you go with this man?” She said, “I’ll go.” 59So they sent Ribqah their sister off, with her nanny and Abraham’s servant and his men. 60They blessed Ribqah and said to her, “Our sister, may you become thousands of myriads, and may your offspring take possession of the gateway of people who are hostile to them.” 61Ribqah got up, she and her girls, and they mounted their camels and followed the man.

So the servant got Ribqah and went. 62Now Yiṣḥaq had come from where you come to the Ḥay Ro’i Well;[[790]](#footnote-790) he was living in the southland region. 63Yiṣḥaq had gone out to think[[791]](#footnote-791) in the open country, as evening turned its face. He lifted his eyes and saw: there, camels coming.

64Ribqah lifted her eyes and saw Yiṣḥaq, and jumped down[[792]](#footnote-792) from on the camel. 65She said to the servant, “Who’s that man walking in the open country about to meet us?” The servant said, “That’s my lord.” So she got her veil and covered herself. 66The servant told Yiṣḥaq all the things that he’d done, 67and Yiṣḥaq brought her into the tent (Sarah his mother’s).[[793]](#footnote-793) He got Ribqah and she became his wife, and he loved her, and Yiṣḥaq found consolation after his mother.

## Interpretation

Gen 24 tells its story at great length. It is the longest short story in Genesis, longer than the creation narrative or the account of God’s making a covenant with Abraham,[[794]](#footnote-794) and *GenR* 60:8 notes the extraordinary phenomenon of its length considering its lack of great significance for halakah. It has been described as a novella,[[795]](#footnote-795) a short novel, though in regular English usage a novella is much longer, and that term better fits the Joseph story—which Gen 24 does resemble in the way it portrays human actions and God’s involvement with them.[[796]](#footnote-796) Its length underscores the importance of finding a wife for Isaac in connection with the fulfillment of Yahweh’s promises and purpose: see v. 7. Yet the story does not focus on that aspect of it significance, and in this sense it rather parallels accounts of how Jacob and Moses acquired wives. It contrasts with these narratives in telling its story with much repetition, which is one aspect of the way dialogue again dominates it. Repetition is one of the marks of folk narrative,[[797]](#footnote-797) but it is also a feature of literary art.[[798]](#footnote-798) Here, the repetition adds to its suspense and also ultimately underscores the involvement of Yahweh’s providence in the process whereby the quest is successful. To put it in the terms of the etymology of the word “providence” and in the terms used in Gen 22, the story relates how Yahweh “sees to it.”[[799]](#footnote-799) Another rhetorical feature characteristic of Genesis is its use of backtracking, describing an action and then going into reverse to describe what led to the action (see vv. 29b and 30, v. 67aα and the rest of v. 67). It has many points of contact with the stories on either side, so it is hardly of independent origin, though in a nice contrast, in later stories Rebekah and Laban are great schemers, whereas here they are the objects of God’s maneuvering.[[800]](#footnote-800) In the terms of traditional source criticism, it comes from the J narrative about Abraham.

Though it is the only detailed scriptural account of the arranging of a marriage, Luther argues strongly that it does not aim to give instruction on how people in general should find a wife.[[801]](#footnote-801) Yet it fits an emphasis in both Testaments that the people of God should marry within the “family” (see e.g., Ezra 9:1-2; 2 Cor 6:14-18). As Gen 14 accepts the validity of the religion of other peoples but Gen 23 presupposes that Israel’s ancestors gain possession of land in Canaan, Gen 24 presupposes the necessity in this connection for members of Abraham’s family to marry within his wider family.[[802]](#footnote-802) The issue raised by Gen 24 is not merely ethnic or cultural identity.[[803]](#footnote-803) In the First Testament there is no objection to a Moabite such as Ruth who commits herself to Yahweh and to Israel, and no objection to an Israelite such as Boaz marrying her.

Gen 24 is also the only detailed account of an “ordinary” person’s personal relationship with God, and while it appears in Genesis because of its significance in connection with the fulfillment of God’s purpose, it represents in story form an understanding of that relationship which corresponds with teaching in Proverbs. In some respects it thus likely represents a vision of how one might expect that relationship to work. In the manner of Proverbs, it combines a stress on God’s involvement guiding and granting success, on commitment and faithfulness on God’s part and on that of human beings, on trust and on prosperity.

**24:1-4.** According to the figures in Genesis, Isaac is nearly 40 (25:20), Abraham is nearly 140 (17:17; 21:5), and it is two or three years after Sarah’s death at 127. In our terms we might imagine Abraham as in his sixties and Isaac as in his late teens; if we think of Isaac as a little older, it might link with the possibility that Abraham is still at Mamre whereas Isaac is in the Negev (v. 62) and is thus absent from this scene. There is no suggestion that Abraham is near death (contrast the near-death scenes in 47:29-32; 50:24-25), and actually he still has 35 years to live (25:7); being senior and going on in years need not imply being about to die, as this commentator hopes (Abraham has already been described in these terms in 18:11). But in Genesis “the provision of a wife for Isaac is his last significant act before his death,”[[804]](#footnote-804) as might be the case for this commentator. In the First Testament, some men arrange their own marriages (e.g. 26:34-35; 38:6), some involve their parents (e.g., 34:4; Judg 14:1-7), and sometimes the parents take the initiative (e.g., Gen 21:21; 38:6). The most conspicuous difference from more betrothal scenes such as Gen 29 and Exod 2 is that the prospective groom will be missing.[[805]](#footnote-805) It’s typical that Isaac should be acted upon rather than acting (cf. Gen 22!).[[806]](#footnote-806) But Abraham’s action is not simply an instance of the pattern whereby parents take the initiative. In this story it’s not going to be Abraham or Isaac who decides on the right girl for Isaac: it will be Yahweh who ensures that the quest comes out right. The recipient of Yahweh’s commission and promises is taking action that relates to the fulfilment of these promises. While his servant will describe in vv. 35-36 how Yahweh has blessed Abraham in every way, the main theme of the talk about blessing in the Abraham story (e.g., 12:1-2) conveys a promise that has not yet been fulfilled, and this chapter relates to that other blessing theme.

Once again we get the impression that Abraham is head of quite a clan (v. 2a). He doesn’t abandon the settlement and the clan to undertake this long mission, and while Isaac will later send Jacob himself to find a wife, this action relates to Jacob’s having endangered his own life. Abraham’s commissioning a member of his staff to find a wife for his son parallels the action of Middle Eastern rulers.[[807]](#footnote-807) As head of staff Abraham would need someone efficient and trustworthy. The man is not an indentured, short-term servant of the kind that the rules in the Torah will seek to protect, but a permanent member of Abraham’s household—like Hagar, though that analogy indicates the vulnerability of someone in that position. The portrait of masters and servants in nineteenth-century English novels may help to convey an impression of the relationship. He is servant and Abraham is master, but it is a relationship of great trust on Abraham’s part. If we were to think of Gen 24 as a story about a slave, it is “the most beautiful slave narrative in the Old Testament.”[[808]](#footnote-808) We do not discover the head of staff’s name, though it has been tempting to identify him with the Eli‘ezer of 15:2;[[809]](#footnote-809) the point about him is not his identity but the role he fulfills for Abraham. Even Isaac’s name does not feature in the main body of the story except in the servant’s prayer, and we are never told how the servant knows Rebekah’s name which he nevertheless uses in v. 45, while the name of her nanny does not appear in this chapter, only in 35:8. “The central interest of this narrative does not lie in concrete geographical references and personal names.”[[810]](#footnote-810) Only incidentally do we discover in due course that the servant takes other people with him on his mission (see v. 32).

The formal procedure which Abraham invokes (v. 2b) symbolizes the trust and vulnerability involved in the commission Abraham is about to give his servant. The action implies grasping Abraham’s genitals, the source of his procreative activity (cf. 46:26; and for swearing an oath in this way, 47:29). Abraham is making himself vulnerable to his servant, and his servant is being admitted to the utter privacy of his master’s body, so that in effect he is taking an oath on his master’s body and on his capacity for life, the capacity he had exercised in fathering Isaac (if the practice implied a link with circumcision and the covenant,[[811]](#footnote-811) one would expect a more explicit reference to such a link).

Swearing in God’s name (v. 3a) requires a correlative form of vulnerability on the servant’s part, and makes possible Abraham’s entrusting this key task to him. In agreeing to undertake the task, the servant is asking for Yahweh to act against him if he fails to do as he promises. Abraham speaks on one hand of Yahweh—anachronistically, as usual, but the name signifies that he is referring to the real God as Israel will know him and to God as the one who is involved in a special way with him in order to fulfill a purpose through his offspring. He also speaks of this God as the God of the whole cosmos, using terms reminiscent of Melchizedek’s words which Abraham also took up—there, too, he prefaced them with the name Yahweh (14:19, 22). Like the creation story and the Melchizedek story, Gen 24 presupposes that Yahweh is the only God who really deserves to be called God.[[812]](#footnote-812) The good news for the servant is that Yahweh as the God of the heavens and the earth holds sway in Mesopotamia as much as in Canaan. The phrase “God of the heavens and God of the earth” comes only here, though Ezra 5:11 has “God of the heavens and of the earth” in Aramaic.

Abraham’s description of the partner he seeks for Isaac (vv. 3b-4) implies the principle of endogamy; one marries someone from one’s own ethnic group. Anglo Americans mostly marry Anglo Americans; African Americans mostly marry African Americans. Problem One in getting Isaac a wife, then, is that she needs to come from his extended family, which is a long way away. But the mention of the Canaanites implies a more specific point. For the audience the particular problem with Canaanites is their offensive practices such as the sacrifice of children, though also the broader danger that through assimilation Israel would die out as a distinctive entity belonging to Yahweh and committed to a distinctive vocation from Yahweh. While the stories of people such as Melchizedek suggest that Abraham’s clan had less reason to be hesitant about the inhabitants of Canaan than the Israelites later had, for such listeners there was indeed reason to be wary about marrying Canaanites. Abraham’s attitude would match the one widely taken in the First Testament. Admittedly, Genesis does not make this point,[[813]](#footnote-813) and if Abraham wished to avoid religious compromise arising from Isaac’s marriage, people living back in Harran might not seem much improvement over Canaanites. They surely served other deities; Yahweh had not got involved with them. But the ease with which not only the servant speaks of Yahweh before them in vv. 35, 40, 42, 44, 48, and 56, but also they speak of Yahweh to him in vv. 31, 50, and 51, suggests that the story’s perspective is that Abraham need not worry about religious contamination from a wife with that background. Nor need he worry that he is moving outside the family within which Yahweh is at work fulfilling his purpose to bring blessing to his family and to the world.

**24:5-9.** The servant points out Problem Two. While no one raises the question whether Isaac should have a say over who he marries, his potential bride will have a say. What if she won’t play ball? It’s not that she won’t fancy Isaac whom she won’t have seen, but that she won’t fancy leaving Mesopotamia for Canaan. Maybe Isaac therefore has to go back to live in Mesopotamia? Which is more important, to marry within the extended family or to stay in Canaan?

There’s no doubt about the answer to that question (vv. 6-7). Abraham states a third principle for identifying a marriage partner—as well as endogamy and avoidance of the Canaanites, there is the importance of living in light of Yahweh’s promise of the land. Isaac is to be unique among Israel’s ancestors for having Yahweh designate his wife, for praying for his wife to have a baby—and for never leaving the promised land.[[814]](#footnote-814) Yahweh had brought Abraham to Canaan with the intention that his offspring should possess this country. Abraham picks up the terms “father’s household” and “homeland” from 12:1 but in using them he underlines the fact that endogamy itself is not enough. The person Isaac marries must also be someone who identifies with this project of Yahweh’s. Yahweh had not literally sworn an oath to give the country to Abraham’s offspring (Yahweh’s only actual oath came in 22:15-18), but he had promised it, and for Yahweh there is no difference. When it is Yahweh who speaks, an oath only buttresses the confidence of the promise’s recipient. Abraham knows that God made that promise and he apparently also knows that Isaac needs to marry someone from back home (notwithstanding her mention in 22:20-24, no one seems to know about Rebekah at this stage in this story,[[815]](#footnote-815) though that mention would have enabled the audience to put two and two together). And Abraham has enough experience of Yahweh getting involved with him and his family to be able to extrapolate to how Yahweh will ensure that the two aspects of his intention find fulfillment (see 16:7-12; 31:17; 22:11-18). It is still quite a statement of trust. “In complete and perfect faith” he affirms that “those heavenly spirits and princes are engaged in this seemingly insignificant, carnal, and foolish work.”[[816]](#footnote-816) So the readers know who the servant will find, though not how he will find her; Abraham doesn’t know who he will find, but he knows how he will find her.[[817]](#footnote-817) The gloss on the name Yahweh that Abraham uses here, “the God of the heavens,” has nearly all its parallels in Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel (e.g., Ezra 7:21, 23; Neh 1:4-5; Dan 2:18-19); it is perhaps a sign that the story gives Aramaic coloring to its story set in Aram.[[818]](#footnote-818) That God is once again the guarantee that the servant’s mission to this far away land can be successful. He is not just active in this land.

Abraham recognizes that God does not usually compel people to fulfill his purpose (vv. 8-9). Abraham has taken his initiative, and he is confident that God’s leading will respond.[[819]](#footnote-819) Rebekah will make her decision. The servant will have done his part.

**24:10-14.** One might have assumed that Abraham was sending off the servant on his own, but it is not so. Arranging a marriage would require gifts to seal or deepen the relationship between the two families, comparable to the gift-giving and celebratory meal at a Western wedding. When someone wants to take a girl a long way away, and when the head of the household is someone as prosperous as Abraham, substantial gifts would be needed, though “all the good things” is a hyperbole; it perhaps implies “examples of all the good things.” Both the camels and their cargo will demonstrate Abraham’s wealth and prosperity to another family from whom he was seeking a wife for his son. In due course the camels will be transport for the women whom the servant brings home (cf. v. 61) and perhaps in the meantime for the men who accompany the servant (v. 32), but they also carry the gifts and they may be gifts for the prospective bride’s family. The brisk summary of the servant’s journey doesn’t make clear to Western readers that the distance is several hundred miles, so that the journey would take several weeks (from the “today” of v. 42 *GenR* 59:11 infers that God miraculously caused it to take only one day to get there, and at v. 61 TgPsJ similarly has it taking only one day to get back). Aram of the Two Rivers is a Hebrew expression equivalent to the Greek name Mesopotamia but it refers in particular to the northwestern part of Mesopotamia, equivalent to northern Syria and northern Iraq. The two rivers are not the Euphrates and the Tigris but the Euphrates and its tributary the Khabur.[[820]](#footnote-820) Though there is a town called Nahor, it is more natural to assume that “Nahor’s town” is Harran (cf. 27:43) and that the servant knows to go there. But Question Three now arises: will he be able to find the right girl?

He happens to arrive in the evening (v. 11). The camels have perhaps not drunk since they left home. While their need for water thus suggests one reason for stopping at the well and kneeling so as to be able to drink, another is that (like the town gateway) the well is a place to meet people as the cool of evening arrives and thus a place for the servant to discover if he can locate Abraham’s extended family. Drawing water is usually the task of young women (cf. 1 Sam 9:11), but in 29:1-8 male shepherds (from Harran) are just hanging about near a well killing time.

It is a strategic moment for the servant to pray (v. 12). “Looking for a bride is a difficult matter—doubly difficult if one is supposed to choose a bride for another, but superhumanly difficult if the servant is seeking her for his young master.”[[821]](#footnote-821) The servant addresses Yahweh in yet a further way, as Abraham’s God. It is the first occurrence of such a description (cf. 26:24; 28:13; 31:42, 53; also Ps 47:9). Expanded to incorporate reference to Isaac and Jacob, it will link the ancestors’ story with the exodus (Exod 3:6, 15, 16; 4:5; later, 1 Kings 18:36; I Chron 29:18; 30:6). Its implication is that Yahweh relates to the clan head in a way that also benefits the clan itself. The servant can himself address this God, so the idea is not that Abraham is like a priest through whom an ordinary person has to go to get to God. Rather, he can make Yahweh’s being Abraham’s God the basis for a prayer that God may do what Abraham needs. Abraham, after all, is his master and his mission is undertaken for Abraham, in connection with the fulfillment of God’s promise to him. The action he seeks will be an expression of Yahweh’s commitment (*ḥesed*):[[822]](#footnote-822) it is the first reference to Yahweh’s commitment in Genesis. For his own sake Yahweh needs to act as the servant says, because of the kind of person he is. The prayer involves a creative linguistic usage. He asks for God to “make something happen,” a paradoxical request since talk of things “happening” points away from the idea of causation.

The servant’s own confidence in God finds further expression in the prayer’s bold specificity (vv. 13-14). It is unparalleled elsewhere in the Scriptures. While prayers by Gideon, Elijah, and Isaiah are near counterparts, they don’t relate directly to a task or to something that another person will need to do. Jonathan’s ploy in 1 Sam 14 which relies on Yahweh’s making things work out requires the Philistines to react in the right way, but it doesn’t involve a prayer. The notion that Yahweh has decided on a specific bride for Isaac is a new feature in the story and it adds tension to the servant’s task. The servant adds further motivation for Yahweh’s answering the prayer. As well as being an *expression* of Yahweh’s commitment, it will be an *evidence* of this commitment. It will lead to its being known and to his being acknowledged as this kind of God. Further, it will mean that the camels function in the story not only as markers of Abraham’s wealth but as a test of a prospective bride’s worthiness to share in it.[[823]](#footnote-823)

**24:15-21.** Whereas in folktales the right person often emerges only after a couple of false starts (and cf. 1 Sam 16; 1 Esdras 3—4), and in Josephus other girls refuse the servant (*Antiquities* I, 16:2), in this story she emerges immediately.[[824]](#footnote-824) The speed with which an answer comes indicates the wonderful nature of Yahweh’s answer and the evidence of his commitment to Abraham. The story provides a concrete embodiment of Isa 65:24 (*GenR* 60:4 also compares Num 16:31 and 2 Chron 7:1). It was an outrageous prayer, but God was okay with it. The family description of Rebekah harks back to 22:20-24, though the servant still does not yet know these facts about her. But what he can see fits the ideal requirements. The servant could perhaps tell from her dress that she was not married. The spring was evidently down some steps, and the servant watches her go down and come back up with her pitcher, in brisk businesslike fashion. It is not the last indication that Rebekah is not someone who messes around.[[825]](#footnote-825)

The servant’s request (vv. 17-20) soon establishes that she has the character to go with her looks and marital status. His own running indicates his urgent desire to see if his prayer is finding its answer and his journey thus meeting with success. His prayer has not asked that the first girl who shows up will be the right one, but that the first girl who agrees to give him a drink and also offers on her own initiative to water the camels will be the right one. Giving someone a little water would be a small thing. Drawing for the camels would be a huge undertaking; if they have not drunk for weeks, their capacity would be gargantuan. Initially she offers only a drink for him, which raises suspense—maybe she’s not the right girl. But then, unprompted, she comes through with her special offer.

“While Rebekah is doing this back-breaking work” (v. 21), the servant is “gazing at her wondering.”[[826]](#footnote-826) The girl didn’t respond in words in quite the way he prescribed, but she acted in the way prescribed. “Rebekah is a woman of deeds rather than of words…. In this she is a counterbalance of the servant who hardly ever stops talking.”[[827]](#footnote-827) As she acted, “he sipped the water and stared at her, asking ‘whether the Lord had prospered his journey or not’” (*GenR* 60:6). The answer to the question is unfolding before his eyes as she waters the camels. But Question Four now is, what family does she belong to and will they welcome him?

**24:22-28**. The gifts would recognize the generous and monumental nature of the task she has undertaken; they might or might not imply something more. They are lavish, but they are nothing compared with the rest of what the camels are carrying.

The gifts also prepare the way (vv. 23-25) for further questions. To Rebekah, the first question would come across not just as inquisitiveness (what right does he have to ask?) but as the lead in to the second question. One might imagine that there would be an inn in Harran, but the servant is working with the assumption that traditional peoples accept an obligation to show hospitality to wayfarers if they can (cf. 19:1-2).[[828]](#footnote-828) The replies to the questions first let the servant in on the secret that the audience knows from 22:20-24, and then establish that the servant and his entourage have found their hospitality.

So his prayer has been answered (v. 26). While lifting the head is a common posture for praise and prayer, bowing the head is an alternative (e.g., Exod 4:31; 12:27; 34:8). Like bowing the knee, it is a sign of obeisance, to a human being or to God. As well as bowing his head, the servant bows his whole body. It is a sign that the whole person is submitting and doing obeisance, to a human being or to God—a sign to God, a sign to other people, and a sign to oneself.

The God of Abraham indeed deserves praise (v. 27). To declare out loud that God is blessed is likewise a way of acknowledging something to him, saying something in oneself, and glorifying him before other people with one’s words; the use of words gives it more specific content. To commitment the servant adds truthfulness (*’ĕmet*), another word appearing for the first time in Genesis; it adds force to “commitment.” The two words commonly appear together and reinforce each other as a hendiadys, truthful commitment or committed truthfulness (e.g., 47:29; Exod 34:6; Ps 25:10; 57:3, 10 [4, 11]; 61:7 [8]). While *ḥesed* denotes “an act which one is not obligated to perform,” *’emet* denotes keeping the promise to act in *ḥesed*.[[829]](#footnote-829) Yahweh has expressed that committed truthfulness to Abraham by leading his servant to the house where Abraham’s family lives.

Rebekah, too, runs, to tell the family (v. 28). Explicitly it’s her mother’s household (cf. Ruth 1:8; Song 3:4; 8:2), as opposed to her father’s (e.g., Gen 38:11; Num 30:16). It’s natural for a girl to go and talk to her mother about what has just happened: “A woman feels at home only in the house of her mother” (*GenR* 60:7).[[830]](#footnote-830) Her father does appear in v. 50, but only secondarily to her brother Laban, and it’s Laban who comes out to meet the servant in v. 29. For practical purposes he seems to be head of the family. Such “fratriarchy” is known from other traditional societies, though it may be that Bethuel is old and leadership in the family has thus passed to Laban.

**24:29-33**. Laban runs, too, but here Genesis relates events in non-chronological order, for dramatic effect. First Laban will have seen Rebekah’s adornments and heard everything from her. Then he will have made room for the servant and his companions, and the camels. Then he will have run out. The servant will have been standing by the well all the time; Laban thus hastens to invite him to the house. The description “blessed by Yahweh” is a good description of his master (see vv. 1 and 35) of which the camels and their cargo (v. 10) as well as the gifts to Rebekah give plentiful evidence; apparently the servant is treated as sharing in that glory. Like anyone else in Genesis, Laban would not use the name Yahweh, but the narrative treats him as a true adherent of the God of Abraham. There’s no suggestion of a negative characterization of Laban such as will appear in Gen 31.[[831]](#footnote-831)

In the house’s courtyard or outhouses (vv. 32-33) there would be stalls for donkeys, camels and other animals, and in the house there are the practicalities of hospitality to be observed. The servant allows the practicalities that benefit the camels and his companions, and washing his feet might be a considerate gesture. But a meal could take a while, and he has things he must say.

**24:34-49.** He introduces himself in terms of his relationship with his family, like Rebekah (v. 24),[[832]](#footnote-832) but the narrative still doesn’t tell us his name. “Blessing” is something that is “great” by definition; only here does the expression “greatly blessed” occur. The itemizing of the blessing indicates that the ten camels with their loads, and the gifts he has made to Rebekah, are only the tip of an iceberg, and the servant makes the important point that Rebekah’s prospective but unwitting suitor is the designated heir to all this wealth (though Genesis itself will not say so until 25:5). For economy, there would be no need to include what the servant said, which repeats what we already know, but repeating it underscores its significance, and the servant varies the account slightly, though at some points tellingly.[[833]](#footnote-833) Rebekah is now a young lady (*‘almāh*) rather than a young woman (*bᵉtûlāh*)[[834]](#footnote-834)—elsewhere the story usually describes her as a girl (*na’ărāh*).The words “father’s household” and “kin-group” now appear; the servant is appealing to a family relationship. It’s the family rather than the girl that has to agree to the match. There’s no mention of the need to avoid taking Isaac back to Harran. Yahweh is the one before whom Abraham has walked about (cf. 17:1). The oath becomes an imprecation (that is, the curse which constitutes the sanction attached to the oath). The servant hadn’t said anything in his prayer about the girl’s watering the camels and he reverses his questioning her about her family and his giving her the gifts. He says he had blessed Yahweh as the one who had led him on a true way. One effect of his story might be to apply a little religious blackmail to Rebekah’s family.[[835]](#footnote-835)

After giving his account of what has happened, the servant poses his question (v. 49), Question Five in the story. The long retelling of what we already knew also functioned to raise suspense. When will we discover whether the family will agree for Rebekah to go to marry Isaac? The servant speaks now of their commitment and truthfulness (the “you” is plural). If it is not forthcoming, he will need to look elsewhere.

**24:50-53a.** The family can recognize Yahweh’s involvement as readily as the servant could. Laban is prominent in the response, as he was in the practicalities of vv. 29-33 where Bethuel was not even mentioned (compare the involvement of Dinah’s brothers in Gen 34 and of Tamar’s brother in 2 Sam 13).[[836]](#footnote-836) Brother and father are the authoritative figures in the family (but more brother than father) and they can speak for it. But they recognize that really they have no option. In light of what the servant has told them, they can say nothing (“bad or good” is a merism for “anything”). “Here is Rebekah before you” expresses the family’s agreement to the marriage proposal made to it, perhaps in a conventional formula.

Once again the servant has reason to bow before Yahweh (vv. 52-53), even lower than he did in v. 26. He gives the betrothal gifts to the bride; these are apparently different and more substantial gifts than the ones he gave her when he met her and when she acted so thoughtfully. Her receiving them signifies her acceptance of the marriage proposal. The servant also give gifts to Rebekah’s brother and mother, who is also thus again mentioned though never named. Gen 34:12 will also speak of these two forms of gift, using the technical terms for them as this passage does not.[[837]](#footnote-837)

The men (v. 54a) then celebrate.

**24:54b-61a.** It might seem inappropriately hasty to want to leave so soon, but it would be natural for the servant to want to get back with his good news (and his find) as quickly as possible.

In due course Rebekah gets her say (vv. 57-58). Her accepting the betrothal gifts has indicated that she is prepared to go to marry Isaac. Question Six is whether she is prepared to go now. Yet her declaration “I’ll go” also takes up the verb Yahweh used in setting Abraham on his move from Harran to Canaan (12:1, 4); she is making her commitment to join in the project Yahweh set going in commissioning Abraham.[[838]](#footnote-838) Dramatically, the story thus holds back until this point her opportunity for acquiescence in words. “From here [it is derived] that a woman may not be given in marriage unless it is with her consent.”[[839]](#footnote-839)

Likewise the blessing that leads into her departure (vv. 59-61a) has some parallels with Yahweh’s original blessing of Abraham and with the restatement of that blessing in 22:17: it recognizes that Rebekah may be subject to attack and it prays for her to do more than survive. Unwittingly, she has made a commitment like Abraham, and they pray that she will be blessed like Abraham.

**24:61b-67**. Again the story jumps quickly over a journey that took several weeks. After the opening resumptive sentence, the focus and point of view move to Isaac. We look through his eyes at the approach of a camel train; we know better than he does that he is about to meet his mail-order bride.[[840]](#footnote-840) The geography continues to be equivocal. Has Abraham been based near Beer Sheba ever since 22:19 (with Sarah living her last days, dying, and being buried in the family settlement in the Hebron area in Gen 23)? Or did Abraham move to the family settlement in the Hebron area sometime after 22:19 so that Isaac alone is based near Beer Sheba? Either way, it’s odd that Sarah’s tent is in the Negev. Ironically, Isaac is in the vicinity of the well where Yahweh first met with Hagar (16:14) but where 25:11 suggests he has settled. He is apparently not out with the sheep; by evening he would have brought them home after watering them at the well. It wouldn’t be surprising if he were then out walking and thinking and praying about his father’s servant’s mission, or about the loss of his mother.[[841]](#footnote-841) The way the story speaks of the servant’s relating to God would fit with its implying such an assumption about Isaac (who will appear as someone who prays in 25:21). It would also fit with the First Testament assumption that dawn and dusk are the times for worship, sacrifice, and prayer. Whatever he is doing, the narrative’s “there” draws us into looking through his eyes as the caravan approaches.

Meanwhile the point of view returns to Rebekah (v. 64). As Isaac lifted his eyes and saw, so she lifted her eyes and saw, and now we watch the approach of the meeting through her eyes. Alighting from the camel before she meets Isaac would be the polite thing to do. Jumping off the camel, when she was dressed as she would be, would be quite an achievement (compare and contrast 1 Sam 25:23); the expression is another way of conveying the commitment and energy with which people act in this story.

Again the sentences follow a dramatic order (v. 65): presumably she asked her question, got her answer, and put on her veil, before making her jump. The servant describes Isaac as “my lord,” and the close of the story makes no reference to Abraham who was the servant’s lord at the beginning and has been the servant’s lord all the way through the story, but it would be over-dramatic (or under-dramatic) to infer that Abraham has died by now without our being told. Apart from the consideration that the next chapter implies that he has many more years to live, the statement in v. 67 would be odd if Abraham is also dead. If Abraham is the servant’s lord, then so is his son; either Abraham is at Hebron but Isaac is further south, or Abraham is at Beer Sheba and Isaac is elsewhere in the Negev. Dramatically, the point is that Abraham sets the story going, both because it is his promise and because he is the father with responsibility for his son’s marriage, but Isaac closes the story, because the broader narrative is in the midst of transferring its focus to him. Abraham and Sarah are the past, Isaac and Rebekah are the future, and the servant (whose role is more important than his name) mediates the move from one generation to the next.[[842]](#footnote-842) There is no indication that Israelite women generally wore veils. In the First Testament’s only other reference to a veil (38:12-19), it functions to disguise the wearer. But the wearing of a veil at a marriage is implied in the also puckish story about Jacob’s marriage (30:21-25): so Rebekah acts like the prospective bride she is.[[843]](#footnote-843)

The focus moves to the interaction between the servant and Isaac (v. 66). For some reason the story does not provide us with a third detailed but varying account of everything that happened as the servant fulfilled his mission. Nor is there is any conversation or even meeting between Isaac and Rebekah. Western readers might think that Question Seven now would be whether they will like each other when they meet, and will the marriage therefore happen. That question barely surfaces.

Instead (v. 67) the story jumps forward to its happy ending, related from Isaac’s angle. In effect, Rebekah and her family have already provided their answer to that question, sight unseen. Insofar as Isaac has any wiggle room in light of the action his father took and the action his servant took, this final verse provides his upbeat, positive answer to the question. The close of the story again works dramatically not chronologically. Eventually Isaac gets Rebekah to take over Sarah’s tent, which establishes her as matriarch of the family in Sarah’s place. On the way to that end, Isaac gets her and she becomes his wife: in other words, they get married, presumably with a great wedding celebration. And he loves her. Love naturally follows rather than precedes marriage when the marriage is an arranged one. It is the first man-woman love in Genesis. Isaac becomes someone who loves as well as someone who is loved (22:2).[[844]](#footnote-844) And finally, with Rebekah in his mother’s tent, he finds consolation (had he been especially close to Sarah because he had lived with her while Abraham was away shepherding elsewhere?). It’s not the same as the abandoning of mother and father in 2:24, though it recalls it.

## Seeking the Fulfilment of God’s Purpose

As it’s tricky to move from an “is” to an “ought,” so it’s tricky to move from a narrative to a generalization, from “Abraham/his servant acted thus” to “one should act thus,” or from “God acted thus” to “God acts thus.” In considering some implications of Gen 24, for the most part I therefore retain its narrative form. It’s impossible to know whether we may expect God to act as he did in this story, but a story may open up possibilities.

Abraham could not bring about the fulfillment of the purpose that God had initiated or the promises that God had made. But there was a step he could take to open up the possibility of that fulfillment (vv. 1-4). While sometimes God instructs his people about action they should take (Gen 12:1), sometimes they properly take initiatives in light of past instructions which establish the framework within which they are to act. There have been occasions when Abraham took an initiative that arguably did not meet that criterion and things have gone wrong. There have been occasions when Abraham took action that had an ambiguous relationship with God’s past instructions and things have gone right. And there have been occasions when Abraham took an initiative that had an ambiguous relationship with God’s past instructions and things have gone wrong. The stories offer no sure-fire formula for action that fit into God’s purpose and will lead to blessing rather than trouble.

Abraham’s response to his servant’s initial worry recognizes this aspect of the dynamic of relationships with God. On one hand, he promises that God’s envoy will guide his servant. The story gives us no basis for this reassurance except a general trust in God to facilitate Abraham’s action that is designed to ensure that he does live in the context of God’s instructions. Abraham does not say that God has promised that the envoy will accompany his servant, and the story does not suggest that the envoy does so in the interventionist and unmistakable way that envoys have previously operated in the Abraham story. This envoy will be behind the scenes, acting via coincidences and via the process of human decision-making. Abraham thus recognizes the tension and the ambiguity involved in God’s acting in this way. God may be able to manipulate coincidences, but he doesn’t manipulate human decision-making in the sense of forcing people to do things against their will. So he may guide the servant to the ideal girl, but she may say “No.”

The servant , too, takes initiatives, and then asks God to work with them, as opposed to asking God for guidance regarding what he is to do and then himself working with that guidance. His prayer presupposes God’s capacity to “make things happen,” even though it is practically an incoherent idea. “Time and chance happen to all,” whether or not they are quick, strong, smart, discerning, or knowledgeable (Eccles 9:11). “Making something happen” (*qārāh* hiphil) is thus close to being an oxymoron, and on the other two occasions when the First Testament uses the expression, once it is something that does not require human cooperation (Num 35:11) and once it’s when Isaac’s son is lying to him (Gen 27:20). But the servant backs up his implausible prayer with an appeal to God’s commitment (*ḥesed*) to Abraham and thus to the fact that he addresses Abraham’s God. The servant’s prayer makes clear that he himself has a direct personal relationship with God. But the basis for his appeal is the link between this particular prayer and the purpose God is pursuing though Abraham. The petition “make this happen for me” is framed on both sides with this fact. Only superficially is he praying for himself; he is praying for Abraham’s sake and for Isaac’s sake and even more for God’s own sake. Sometimes God makes things happen in a way that defies regular explanation. Sometimes God does work through coincidences and human decision-making.

God answers the prayer and “makes it happen,” with just a little slippage, illustrating two aspects of the significance of prayer, both of which raise systematically irresolvable questions. First, the Scriptures imply two considerations about prayer itself that are in irresolvable tension. God encompasses all time, and all time is open to God; what is the unexperienced future to human beings is accessible to God. But prayer can make God do things he would not otherwise do and abandon things he would do—make him have a change of mind, as the Scriptures put it. Gen 24 illustrates the genius of narrative theology in that it does not seek to explain how the two considerations fit together but it does tell a story that illustrates their interweaving. The servant prays; God answers his prayer, which thus has made a difference; but the answer comes before he even finishes praying, which reflects how all time is open to God.

Second, the Scriptures imply two considerations about the relationship between God making things happen and human beings making things happen, which are also in irresolvable tension. The servant has asked for God to bring it about that a certain girl should come to the well and by her words identify herself as God’s choice for Isaac, and God does so—which shows that he can bring it about that people do as he decides without their realizing that they are fulfilling this role. Yet Rebekah had set out for the well before the servant prayed, let alone before he finished praying, and had done so (to infer something from the story’s silence) just because she decided to, in keeping with her daily routine, rather than because she sensed a divine prompting. The slippage features in her not quite behaving as the servant prescribed, though it is near enough for the servant eventually to be satisfied and for the readers and God to be satisfied.

Neither Abraham in his words to the servant nor the servant in his words to God had said anything about Isaac’s bride coming from Abraham’s immediate extended family, though the servant will momentarily speak in those terms. God’s answer to the servant’s prayer goes way beyond what the narrator has said that he asked. The answer prompts the servant to praise. Such praise is not merely a matter of the heart. It is expressed in a bodily posture involving the intercessor’s prostrating his whole body before the one who has so startlingly granted his request. And it is expressed in words spoken out loud, as is necessary if they are to give glory to the God who has acted and thus to draw other people into their recognition of him. Perhaps the implication is that Rebekah, receiving the servant’s gifts and hearing his words of praise, knows the destiny that has been laid in front of her and accepts it.

Even if so, the servant recognizes that the implementing of God’s will also requires the family’s agreement. It, too, might say “No.” Whether or not the servant’s words and actions have already convinced Rebekah, the report of the entire sequence of events convinces her family. As people look back over a story that they have been told, they can say “It was a series of coincidences” but they can say “It’s from God. We can’t resist its implications.” And when Rebekah arrives in the Negev, it would only fit the assumptions and implications of the rest of the story if Isaac was out walking and meditating and praying (as v. 63 may imply).

# Genesis 25:1-11— Conclusions to Abraham’s Story

## Overview

Abraham’s story closes with an account of his third marriage and its offspring (vv. 1-4), of his establishing the position of Isaac as his primary heir (vv. 5-6), and of his own death and burial (vv. 7-11).

## Translation

1Abraham again got a wife; her name was Qeturah. 2She gave birth for him to Zimran, Yoqšan, Medan, Midyan, Yišbaq, and Šuah. 3Yoqšan fathered[[845]](#footnote-845) Šeba and Dedan, while Dedan’s descendants were the Aššurites, the Letušites, and the Le’ummites, 4and Midyan’s descendants were Epah, Eper, Hanok, Abida, and Elda’ah. All these were Qeturah’s descendants.

5Abraham gave all that he had to Yiṣḥaq, 6but to the sons of Abraham’s secondary wives Abraham gave gifts while he was still alive, and sent them off away from Yiṣḥaq his son eastward, to the east country.

7This is the span[[846]](#footnote-846) of the years in the life that Abraham lived: 175 years. 8So Abraham breathed out and died,[[847]](#footnote-847) at a good age, old and full,[[848]](#footnote-848) and joined his kin. 9Yiṣḥaq and Yišma‘e’l his sons buried him in the Double Cave in the field of Epron ben Ṣohar the Ḥētite, which is close to Mamre, 10the field that Abraham acquired from the Ḥētites. There Abraham and his wife Śarah were buried. 11After Abraham’s death, God blessed Yiṣḥaq his son. Yiṣḥaq lived near the Ḥay Ro’i Well.

## Interpretation

The offering of Isaac, the death of Sarah, and the finding of a wife for Isaac have been taking Abraham’s story towards to its close, which now comes with the account of his making his will, his death and his burial, and God’s blessing of Isaac (vv. 5-11). The closure of his story is first delayed by the surprising account of his undertaking another marriage (vv. 1-4), which provides background to the report of his disbursement of his assets (vv. 5-6). It also gives the audience more information on the ancestors of peoples Israel knew and was related to—whether or not it realized it was so related. The individual parts of the unit (vv. 1-4, 5-6, 7-11—possibly with further subdivisions) look independent of one another. MT sees the unit as one paragraph. There is no scholarly consensus on the possible background of the material (e.g., in J or P or the work of later editors).

**25:1-6.** The note about Abraham’s taking another wife might raise two questions, when and why. While he might have married Qeturah after Sarah died, his fathering six more sons (let alone daughters?) in his great old age, having managed only two in the previous 137 years, might seem less likely than his having married Qeturah sometime earlier. The account of the marriage then comes here because this section is finishing off Genesis’s account of Abraham’s story. If he had married Qeturah long ago, the answer to the “why” question might be that an important person like Abraham would naturally mark his status by having more than one wife, especially given Sarah’s infertility and his divorce of Hagar. One would indeed then expect him to have more than the two sons he otherwise had, one by Hagar, one by Sarah. If he married Qeturah after Sarah’s death, the answer to the “why” would more likely be that he needed a wife to run the household, preferably someone young and energetic (see Prov 31:10-31), rather than that the “decrepit” old man was also “lascivious,”[[849]](#footnote-849) though one doesn’t then like to think about the dynamics of Qeturah’s relationship with Rebekah.

Either way, Abraham’s children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren (vv. 2-4) are the fulfillment of the promise that he would become the ancestor of many nations (17:4-6). The lists also function in a way parallel to the ones in Gen 10: they indicate that the family of Abraham as Israel’s ancestor belongs by a bond of relationship to the greater whole comprising the peoples that live in Israel’s world. These peoples “form a penumbra around the social spheres headed by Ishmael and Isaac.”[[850]](#footnote-850) Israel’s world is not to be defined merely by the relationships of enmity with some people such as Midian. “Human and family bonds have deeper roots than political divisions.” Our later context reminds us that in Abraham this statement also applies to the relationships of Jews, Christians, and Muslims.[[851]](#footnote-851) Some of the names are elsewhere the names of individual peoples or places (e.g., Sheba and Dedan), others are plural and are thus the names of groups (e.g., Ashshurites, Letushites), while yet others might be individuals or places or peoples. The descendants include the ancestors of peoples who are thereby indicated to be the Israelites’ relatives but with whom Israel was involved in trading relationships, not least in spices, which fits the fact that their mother’s name suggests she was a spice girl (etymologically, “Qeturah” would mean “Spiced”). We know nothing else about most of the people who might be descended from these figures, but such links as we have suggest peoples to the east and southeast of Canaan, in northern and southern Arabia, which fits with the reference in v. 6 to Abraham sending them off east.[[852]](#footnote-852) The Medanites feature in 37:36. The Midianites appear more frequently. It is they who produce a wife for Moses (Exod 2—3), who thus marries within the family of Abraham.[[853]](#footnote-853) Later they appear in an unfriendly connection (e.g., Num 31; Judg 6). In the meantime, they appear in a neutral one: “within one generation the Midianites grow so that they fill a caravan of merchants”[[854]](#footnote-854)—as for that matter do the Ishmaelites and Medanites (Gen 37:25, 28, 36). Among the grandchildren, the order of lists in 1 Chron 1 suggests that the Dedanites lived in Syria. Sheba has featured with different genealogies in Gen 10:7, 28; the link with Dedan suggests that this Sheba stands for a northern branch of that group. The Ashshurites are apparently a group in Arabia (cf. BDB), a different group from people belonging to the well-known Ashshur, the Assyrians (10:32) for whom the First Testament uses the gentilic noun Ashshur or the expression “sons of Ashshur” and not the term Ashshurites.

But Isaac is the son of Abraham who really counts (v. 5). Deut 21:15-17 will establish that your average Israelite cannot operate in Abraham’s way; it is another example of how his special position in the working out of God’s purpose (and his antedating the instructions associated with Sinai) means that his actions are exceptional and may not provide example or warrant for everyone (see Gen 22 and Gen 24).

It now emerges that Qeturah is implicitly one of Abraham’s secondary wives (v. 6), like Hagar, whereas in v. 1 she was simply called a wife; the point is explicit in 1 Chron 1:32. It seems to follow from being secondary wives that your offspring do not have inheritance rights (see on Gen 22:24). What they receive is up to their father’s discretion. Like someone in the West, Abraham is expected to decide on what happens to his estate before he dies, though presumably he did not actually transfer everything to Isaac before he died.[[855]](#footnote-855) But perhaps a man might commonly implement some bequests before he dies, which could reduce family conflict after his death.[[856]](#footnote-856) Sending off Hagar and Qeturah’s sons continues the process of peoples spreading through the world that was described in Gen 10. It does not mean that they “like Ishmael, are ultimately rejected by God” or are “shipped eastward, away from God’s promise.”[[857]](#footnote-857) Ishmael certainly lives in the context of God’s promise,[[858]](#footnote-858) and it would not be an adventurous inference to think that they do, too—or at least live there in the same sense as all other peoples. And Midian, Ephah, and Sheba, along with Ishmael’s two oldest sons Nebayot and Qedar (v. 13), reappear in Isa 60:6-7 proclaiming Yahweh’s praise and bringing the fruit of the spice trade to the worship of Jerusalem. *Jub* 20 has Abraham preaching a substantial farewell sermon to them with encouragements and exhortations (he goes on to preach an even more substantial one to Isaac). “These sons were sent away that there might be a true home, in the end, to return to.”[[859]](#footnote-859)

**25:7-11**. Genesis gives a full description of Abraham’s dying. Observably, death means stopping breathing, expiring, breathing out for the last time and not breathing in again. Whenever the Torah uses this verb, it refers to “an easy, painless kind of death not preceded by lengthy illness.”[[860]](#footnote-860) In Abraham’s case, after these 175 years (let us think in our terms of 95), he died at a good age. He was old and full. He had lived as long as one could imagine or hope. And it was enough. It was time to join his people or his kin, the members of the family who had passed. He was not “in bondage to the desire of life.”[[861]](#footnote-861) Literally and physically Abraham joined Sarah; while he would indeed be joining his other relatives in Sheol, they had been buried elsewhere not in the family tomb, and Genesis is using the regular terminology in a loose, metaphorical sense,[[862]](#footnote-862) as if he were in the position of people who do join their family in the family tomb. As far as the living are concerned, metaphorically and theologically speaking “they belong to the ancestors who have gone before and whose memory is preserved.”[[863]](#footnote-863) The expression “his kin” uses the plural of the word for a people (‘*am*), which invites the audience to reflect on the fact that Abraham is actually joining “his people” and not merely his immediate kin; “his people” was the covenant people in 17:14. Typically for Genesis, if you have lived a full life there is no sense of there being a problem about dying and about this joining. Living means enjoying the company of one set of family members; death means moving to enjoy the company of an earlier set in relaxed fashion. And if Yahweh is the God of Abraham (Jesus argues), he is not God of the dead but of the living (Mark 12:26-27), so Abraham’s life is by no means over.[[864]](#footnote-864)

Neatly, Isaac and Ishmael come together to bury their father (vv. 9-10). “In this scene, fulfillment of the covenant promise is momentarily foreshadowed.”[[865]](#footnote-865) Although there is some sense in which Ishmael has been sent away years previously, he has evidently not been sent away too definitively (any more than Qeturah’s sons), though in any case, a special significance attaches to him. The bareness of the comment about Isaac and Ishmael might make one wonder what kind of collaboration this burying involved; funerals can be occasions for reopening wounds, and Genesis does not relate a reconciliation between the brothers like the one between Jacob and Esau or Joseph and his brothers.[[866]](#footnote-866) But then, Isaac and Ishmael had never had a fight. Their problem was their parents….

For a moment Genesis then returns to focus on Isaac (v. 11), in case we think that Ishmael has the same status as his brother. Yet paradoxically, Isaac is still based near the well associated with Hagar and thus with his older brother (cf. 24:62). The Abraham story closes with God’s blessing of Isaac, which indicates the history of the blessing is not coming to an end: “this history has future and hope.”[[867]](#footnote-867)

1. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 96, 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sarna, *Genesis*, 86-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*,20*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Reno, *Genesis*, 137, 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Barth, *Dogmatics* III, 1:62; and for what follows, the continuation of the chapter in Barth on “Creation, History and Creation History.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cf. Seebass, *Genesis* 2/1:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The *w-* indicates that the section carries straight on from 11:10-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. On Abra[ha]m and Saray/Sarah’s names, see the comment on 17:5, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *‘Al-pᵉnê* hardly means simply “before” (Vg); cf. Dillmann, *Genesis* 1:406.C. W. Retief argues for “in the face of (in confrontation with)” (“When Interpretation Traditions Speak Too Loud for Ethical Dilemmas to Be Heard,” *OTE* 23 [2010]: 788-803). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A homonym means flame or fire, not least an idol-maker’s fire or a persecutor’s fire (e.g., Isa 31:9; 44:16; 47:14; 50:11), which encourages the development of a midrash about Abraham being threatened by fire at the hand of the Chaldeans and about Haran the idol-maker ending up in a fiery furnace (see e.g., *Jub* 12; TgPsJ; Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 112). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For *kaśdîm* LXX has *chaldaiōn*, Vg *chaldaeorum*—hence English “Chaldeans.” The (older) Babylonian form has š, the Assyrian form *l* (see *HALOT*). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. If *‘ăqārāh* could simply mean childless, without the implication of infertile (so Sarna, *Genesis*, 87), it would preserve suspense for the unfolding of the story, but the suggestion seems doubtful (see e.g., H.-J. Fabry on the word, *TDOT* 11:322). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. As in 3:16, apposition enhances the similarity/opposition between clauses (DG 147ab). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. SP and some LXX mss add Nahor to this verse (SP also adds Milkah) in light of Nahor and Milkah’s being there later (see Gen 24; 29:4-5). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Literally “with them.” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. In MT *ḥārān* (contrast LXX *charran*) because MT usually avoids doubling *r* and lengthens the preceding vowel to compensate (cf. GK 22s); transliterating as Ḥarran makes clearer the difference from the name of Terah’s son Haran (which begins with *he* not *ḥet*). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. SP has 145, which solves a chronological problem (see the comment). Acts 7:4 might presuppose SP’s reading or might simply be referring to the order of events in the MT narrative (cf. the reference to Exod 3 in Mark 12:26). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. KJV “had said”; cf. the previous footnote and the comment, and the discussion in *TTH* 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Literally, “go for yourself.” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Cf. DG 94, remark 8, though “and thus I will” (consequence rather than purpose) is also possible (cf. JM 116b); but “and I will” (LXX, Vg) under-translates. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The verb is cohortative; so also the first verb in v. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. More literally, “so be a blessing!”—that is, the verb is imperative, which suggests purpose when following on a cohortative (cf. *TTH* 65; DG86d), but also the kind of imperative that conveys a promise—as well as the kind of promise that conveys an imperative (see J. S. Biden, “The Morpho-Syntax of Genesis 12:1-3,” *CBQ* 72 [2010]: 223-37). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. LXX, Vg, SP have plural for this participle, assimilating to the first. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Whereas the cohortative verbs translated “intend to” suggest deliberate will, the ordinary yiqtol for this final verb suggests something less intrinsic to Yahweh’s purpose (see P. D. Miller, “Syntax and Theology in Genesis xii 3a,” *VT* 34 [1984]: 472-76). The other first-person verbs in vv. 1-2 have suffixes, which means they cannot take cohortative form, though one might see them as having that significance *de facto*; this last verb is the only one where Yahweh could have used the cohortative and does not. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The niphal verb could have passive, reflexive, or middle connotations. For passive, cf. *DCH*; Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing and the Nations*. But Genesis could have used pual to convey this meaning (e.g., Num 22:6; 2 Sam 7:29; Ps 112:2; 128:4). For reflexive, cf. BDB, *HALOT*; Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 117; E. Noort, “Abraham and the Nations,” in van Ruiten et al. (eds.), *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites*, 3-31 (18-30). But hitpael in 22:18; 26:4 has reflexive meaning, and it seems less likely that niphal here simply means the same thing. More likely it has middle connotations. In substance, the translation makes little difference; one way or another the nations will get blessed though Abraham. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. In good evangelical fashion, TgOnq, TgNeoph takes this phrase to refer to the souls they had converted. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. LXX adds “in its length,” making more explicit that Abraham is behaving as if entering into legal possession of the country (J. L. Ska, “Gen 12,6,” in Ausloos/Lemmelijn [eds.], *A Pillar of Cloud*, 449-54); cf. 13:17 and the comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Or *’ēlôn* might mean terebinth. Gen 35:4 refers to an ’*ēlāh* near Shechem; cf. also Josh 24:26; Judg 9:6, 37 for similar words. Linking the right word to the right tree is difficult. Both are leafy with wide-spreading branches, but they are quite different, though there are many varieties of oak; the terebinth also has red berries and grows pistachio nuts. Vg, Tg have “plain” for “oak,” perhaps by associating the reference to the Teacher’s Oak with the reference to Oak Vale in Judg 7:1 and thus guarding against any idea that Abraham was involved in wrongful worship (Aberbach/Grossfeld, *Targum Onkelos*, 79-80; and see more generally J. Hutzli, “Interventions présumées des scribes concernant le motif de l'arbre sacré dans le Pentateuque,” *Semitica* 26 [2014]: 313-31). TgNeoph also has “Vision” for “Teacher,” implying a link with *rā’āh* rather than *yārāh*—and not inappropriately in light of Yahweh’s appearing to Abraham (*rā’āh*) in v. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Wenham, *Genesis 1—15*, 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. G. Van Pelt Campbell (“Refusing God’s Blessing,” *BSac* 165 [2008]: 268-82) sees the passage as facing both ways and as a turning-point. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. On the relationship with 11:1-9, see especially M. A. Awabdy, “Babel, Suspense, and the Introduction to the Terah-Abram Narrative,” *JSOT* 34 (2010): 3-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See the translation note. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See Hamilton, *Genesis 1—17*, 363-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See *DCH*. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See Westermann, *Genesis 12—50*, 138; Sarna, *Genesis*, 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Arnold, *Genesis*, 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* 1:6:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Cf. Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*, 147-48; he notes that the Scriptures often put things in a non-chronological order. *Jub* 12:28-31 has Abraham going with Terah’s blessing. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Cf. Rashi’s comments, *Br’šyt*, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Reno, *Genesis*, 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Cf. Luther, *Genesis 6—14*, 247-48; Luther indeed assumes that Abraham was an idolater. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Levenson, *Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, 83 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Cf. Didymus, *Genesis*, 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Cf. Dillmann, *Genesis* 2:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Cf. Barth, *Dogmatics* II, 2:355. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Cf. Calvin, *Genesis* 1:344. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Cf. Qimchi, *Genesis*, on the verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Cf. Mbuvi, *Belonging in Genesis*, 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Cf. D. L. Petersen, “Polities in Genesis 12—36,” in J. T. Strong and S. S. Tuell (eds.), *Constituting the Community* (S. D. McBride Festschrift; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 75-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Qimchi, *Genesis*, on the verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Miller, “Syntax and Theology in Genesis xii 3a,” 474. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. See N. MacDonald, “Did God Chose the Patriarchs?” in MacDonald et al. (eds.), *Genesis and Christian Theology*, 245-66 (257), following Kaminsky, *Yet Jacob I Loved*. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Barth, *Dogmatics* III, 2:214. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. On the both-and of Jews and Gentiles in Acts 3, see P. Mallen, “Genesis in Luke-Acts,” in Moyise/Menken (eds.), *Genesis in the NT*, 60-82 (70-74). [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 18-45*, 244. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. But see A. G. Vaughn, “‘And Lot Went with Him,” in B. F. Batto and K. L. Roberts (eds.), *David and Zion* (J. J. M. Roberts Festschrift; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 111-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. See G. E. Wright, *Shechem* (New York: McGraw, 1965). [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Cf. S. Bar, “Abraham’s Trees,” *Irish Biblical Studies* 28 (2010): 2-20 [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Cf. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 18—45*, 256-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. W. P. Brown, “Manifest Diversity, in MacDonald et al. (eds.), *Genesis and Christian Theology*, 3-25 (3-6). [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Calvin, *Genesis* 1:353-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Cf. S. Riecker, “Ein theologischer Ansatz zum Verständnis der Altarbaunotizen der **Genesis,” *Biblica* 87 (2006): 526-30.** [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. On this expression, see the footnote and comment on 4:26. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Fretheim,”Genesis,” 430. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Luther, *Genesis 6—14*, 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. More literally but idiomatically, “moved on, in going and in moving on.” [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. For *hannegbāh* Vg, Aq, Sym, Tg have “to the south,” suggesting simply a direction of travel, but the same expression means “to the southland” in 13:1; simple *negbāh* is the expression for “southwards” in 13:14. Etymologically *negeb* suggests dry land, and LXX has “the wilderness” each time. See Aberbach/Grossfeld, *Targum Onkelos*, 80-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. More literally “hunger.” [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. *’Ereṣ* isthe ordinary word for a country, but it can refer to a narrower area (e.g., 13:6-7; 20:1; 22:2) or a broader one (e.g., 2:11-14) as well as to the earth as whole (e.g., 10:32; 14:9, 22). [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. In other contexts Abraham’s qatal verb could imply that he had “come to know,” raising the question whether he had not noticed before (see e.g., *GenR* 40:4); but *yāda‘* is commonly a quasi-stative (JM 112a). [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. The abb’a’ order (“kill me and you let-live”) underlines the contrast between “me” and “you” and their .respective fates. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. In Egyptian, “Pharaoh” originally meant “great house,” so the phrase is comparable to “White House officials.” [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. See J. Pickering, “Divine Silence,” *Scriptura* 113 (2014): 1-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Cf. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Dillmann, *Genesis* 2:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. So Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Cf. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. See *ANET*, 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Cf. Calvin, *Genesis* 1:361. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Cf. van Dijk-Hemmes, *The Double Voice of Her Desire*, 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. *DSS* 1:38-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Cf. Cf. J. T. A. G. M. van Ruiten, “The Book of Jubilees and the Genesis Apocryphon,” in H. Assel et al. (eds.), *Beyond Biblical Theologies* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2012), 545-75 (564). [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Cf. De La Torre, *Genesis*, 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. See J. C. Exum, “Who’s Afraid of ‘The Endangered Ancestress’?” in J. C. Exum and D. J. A. Clines (eds.), *The New Literary Criticism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 90-113. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Cf. J. A. Davidson, “Genesis Matriarchs Engage Feminism,” *AUSS* 40 (2002): 169-78 (170). [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 95, and the footnote to v. 12b. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 1—15*, 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. J. E. McKinlay, “Who’s/Whose Sarah?” Conrad/Boer (eds.), *Redirected Travel*, 131-43 (141). [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Visotzky, *Genesis of Ethics*, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. *GenAp* 20 expatiates at some length on the assessment by Pharaoh’s staff. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Cf. Jerome, *Hebrew Questions on Genesis*, 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. So Ephrem, “Commentary on Genesis,” 149 [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. See S. P. Brock, “Creating Women’s Voices,” in Grypeou/Spurling (eds.), *Exegetical Encounter*, 125-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Cf. van Dijk-Hemmes, *The Double Voice of Her Desire*, 136-45; [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. B. L. Eichler, “On Reading Genesis 12:10-20,” in M. Cogan et al. (eds.), *Tehillah le-Moshe* (M. Greenberg Festschrift; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 23-38 (27). [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion*, 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Cf. Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*, 156; and at length, *GenAp* 20, which also reassures the reader that Pharaoh did not approach Sarah or have sex with her (so also TgPsJ). [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Hamilton, *Genesis 1—17*, 385. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. After teaching the Egyptians Babylonian arithmetic and astronomy, Josephus says (*Antiquities* 1, 8:2). [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. *GenAp* adds silver and gold in 12:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. On this expression, see the footnote and the comment on 4:26. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Cf. L. R. Helyer, “The Separation of Abraham and Lot,” *JSOT* 26 (1983): 77-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. The *w* is explanatory (see the footnote to 4:4). [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Literally “men, brothers”: in the apposition, the second noun more closely defines the first (GK 131b). “Brothers” has the broad sense of “relatives”: so also in (e.g.) Gen 14; 16; 24; 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Literally left, right, right, left, because Hebrew thinking often orients by imagining one is standing looking east. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Literally, “from the front”: see previous note, and the footnote to 2:8 (also 3:24; 11:2; 12:8). [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. The word order with the subject becoming before the verb is unusual and draws attention to the newness of this subsection. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Here Yahweh uses a different way of referring to directions—towards Mount Zaphon, towards the Negev, in front of you, and towards the [Mediterranean] sea. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Literally, “to the age.” [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. TgOnq has “Mamre Plains,” TgNeoph “Vision Plain,” TgPsJ “Mamre Vison” (see the footnote to 12:6; also Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*, 55). [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Coats, *Genesis*, 118. See further D. Rickett, “Rethinking the Place and Purpose of Genesis 13,” *JSOT* 36 (2011): 31-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Skinner, *Genesis*, 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Gunkel*, Genesis*, 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Cf. Driver, *Genesis*, 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. Arnold, *Genesis*, 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Luther, *Genesis 6—14*, 368 (one wonders how he knew—but perhaps it is just an inference from the reference to Yahweh’s garden). [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Luther, *Genesis 6—14*, 345. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Cf. McNamara, *Targum Neofiti: Genesis*, 49; Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*, 54; also Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum*, 128-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Fretheim, *Abraham*, 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. Blenkinsopp, *Abraham*, 51. But Gen 13 leaves this point understated and in some readings his character gets worse as time goes by (see D. Rickett, “Creating an Unrighteous Outsider,” *CBQ* 76 [2014]: 610-33) while in some he gets righteous (cf. J. R. Lundbom, “Parataxis, Rhetorical Structure, and the Dialogue over Sodom in Genesis 18,” in Davies/Clines (eds.), *World of Genesis*, 136-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. P. J. Sabo, “Blurred Boundaries in the Lot Story,” in I. D. Wilson and D. Gersoni-Edelman (eds.), *History, Memory, Hebrew Scriptures* (E. Ben Zvi Festschrift; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 433-44 (433). [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. Cf. Qimchi, *Genesis*, on the verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Hamilton, *Genesis 1—17*, 394. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. *GenAp* 21.8-12 has God telling Abraham to go to Ramat Hazor north of Beth El from which he has athe best view in all four directions, and it is from here that God issues his promise. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Cf. *GenR* 41:10; Y. Gitay, “The Promise: The Winding Road,” *OTE* 32 (2007): 352-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Sym, Vg have Pontus; *GenAp* similarly has Cappadocia. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. The syntax in vv. 1-2 breaks down; “they” denotes all four kings, as (e.g.) Vg makes clear. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. That is, the kings in v. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. MT *śᵉdēh*;LXX implies *śārê* “officers.” [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. Literally “pits, pits.” [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. For *nāpal* denoting a voluntary “fall,” see e.g. 17:3; 24:64; 33:4; in Jer 38:19 it means flee to/take refuge (Hamilton, *Genesis 1—17*, 403). [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. That is, the four kings in v. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. *Wayyāreq* is hiphil from *rûq* or *rîq*, which would mean more literally “emptied out” but can refer to drawing a sword; here it would involve metonymy (Tal, *Genesis*, 114\*). SP has *wayyādeq* (implying the easy confusion of d and r in Hebrew) from a hypothesized *dûq* meaning “number” or “muster” (cf. LXX, Vg; *HALOT*, *DCH*). [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. The phrase in brackets explains the rare expression *ḥănîkāyw* (Gunkel, *Genesis*, 277). [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. Etymologically, Šaveh itself means “plain” (see BDB), so this double expression anticipates the English phrase “Beqa Valley” (“Valley Valley”). [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. TgOnq and Tb PsJ speak of Melchizedek “ministering” rather than as being a priest, to avoid the questions that issue from his not being an Aaronide, and to sidestep the Christian idea that Jesus was a priest in succession to Melchizedek (cf. Aberbach/Grossfeld, *Targum Onkelos*, 89-91; Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*, 58). [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. *Māgan* piel, a denominative from *māgēn* “shield,” apparently piel privative (see GK 52h; *IBHS* 24.4cd). [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. The declarative/performative qatal verb suggests a speech act, “I hereby raise.” LXX, *GenAp* omit Yahweh; SP has “God.” [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. See S. Morschauser, “Campaigning on Less Than a Shoe-String,” *JSOT* 38 (2013): 127-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. As commonly happens, the rest of the oath is left to speak for itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. The rare *bil‘ādê*, perhaps etymologically “not to” (see BDB, 116). [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. L. Köhler, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (2nd ed. Tübingen: Mohr, 1947), 39; cf. von Rad, *Genesis*, 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. E.g., Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. Cf. Fretheim, *Abraham,* 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. See e.g., Wenham, *Genesis 1—15*, 315-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. So e.g., Luther, *Genesis 6—14*, 394-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. J. G. Mathews (*Melchizedek’s Alternative Priestly Order* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013]) suggests a number of less specific intertextual links. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 175-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. Westermann surveys the “three main questions” which “have dominated the whole course of the study of Gen. 14,” the question of historicity, of a document at the basis of the chapter, and of the chapter’s unity and composition (*Genesis 12—36*, 188-90), and comes to less agnostic conclusions than mine, as does Wenham in his discussion of the story’s historical value (*Genesis 1—15*, 318-20). [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. So e.g., Sarna, *Genesis*, 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. See the translation note. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. See Tal, *Genesis*, 110-12\*, for the versions’ treatment of the names (and 112-16\* for later names in the chapter). [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. Cf. BDB, 18b. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Cf. Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. See Brayford, *Genesis*, 294. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. Cf. Arnold, *Genesis*, 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. Cf. Keil/Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. Coats, *Genesis*, 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. Cf. Luther, *Genesis 6—14*, 377. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. Removing the account of his appearance (vv. 18-20) makes the chapter smoother. G. Granerød (*Abraham and Melchizedek* [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010]) has argued most systemically for its secondary nature; contrast S. Tatu, “Making Sense of Melchizedek,” *JESOT* 3 (2014): 49-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. D. Elgavish (“The Encounter of Abram and Melchizedek,” in Wénin [ed.], *Genesis*, 495-508) sees them as suggesting a covenant-making ceremony in which Melchizedek is recognizing Abraham. Josephus (*Antiquities* I, 10:2) simply calls it a feast. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 205, and his references; see also the footnote to 4:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. See *DSS* 2:1206-9; and e.g., M. Reiss, “The Melchizedek Traditions, *SJOT* 28 (2012): 259-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. See e.g., S. Docherty, “Genesis in Hebrews,” in Moyise/Menken (eds.), *Genesis in the NT*, 130-46 (133-37). [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. Jerome, *Hebrew Questions on Genesis*, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. See Cohn, “Negotiating with the Natives.” [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. Brichto, *Names of God*, 196-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. In the context of the Peasants’ Revolt, Luther insists not (*Genesis 6—14*, 375). Granerød (*Abraham and Melchizedek*) relates Gen 14 to the Judahite community in the Persian (or Greek) period, which it urges to stand up for itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. Calvin, *Genesis* 1:383. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. Fretheim, *Abraham*, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. Cf. Fretheim, *Abraham*, 68-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. Cf. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. Cf. Seebass, *Genesis* 2/1:69. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. Lipton, *Revisions of the Night*, 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. Literally “was” or “happened” or “became.” [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. Literally, “[will be] a much-making exceedingly”; the infinitive absolute functions as a gerund (GK131q). *GenAp* 22 introduces the promises with a note on how much Yahweh has enriched Abraham in the ten years since he left Harran. [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. *’Ădōnāy* may be the word for lord in the plural with a first-person suffix (thus “my lord”; cf. BDB, *HALOT*, *DCH*) or the word for lord with an archaic intensive plural sufformative (hence “great lord”; cf. LXX, Vg); see O. Eissfeldt’s discussion of *’ādôn* in *TDOT* 1:59-72. [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. *Ben-mešek*: the second word comes only here and the meaning has to be guessed from the context. For some solutions to the mystery of v. 2b, see e.g., Hamilton, *Genesis*, 420-22; H. Seebass, “Gen 15 2b,” *ZAW* 75 (1963): 317-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. In this context *yāraš* denotes inheriting, but in itself the verb simply refers to secure ownership not possession through inheriting: see the recurrence of the verb and related noun in vv. 7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
191. The verb is simple *waw* plus qatal. GK112ss takes it as suggesting continuance; but the following *waw­-*consecutive is then difficult*.* DG 84c suggests it sums up what has gone before: “so he trusted.” *TTH* 133 calls it an isolated irregularity (cf. JM 119z). [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. LXX and Vg have passive verbs “it was deemed,” implying that the third person singular is impersonal. The clause then refers to a deeming about Abraham rather than by Abraham (cf. the niphal verb in Ps 106:31; and the niphal verbs in passages such as Lev 7:18). But there are no pointers to this impersonal understanding. While Yahweh is the subject of the qatal in Ps 32:2, and Qimchi assumes that understanding here (*Genesis*, on the verse), the construction as a whole here is different (D. A. Klein discusses the question from a Jewish angle in “Who Counted Righteousness to Whom,” *JBT* 36 [2008]: 28-32). Luther sees the idea that Abraham is the subject as satanic (*Genesis 15—20*, 21). Seebass (*Genesis* 2/1:63) renders “he [Yahweh] planned” an act of *ṣᵉdāqāh*, whose implications are not so different from Abraham’s seeing Yahweh’s promise as an act of *ṣᵉdāqāh*, though it is open to an eschatological re-reading (see Y. Hwang, “Eschatology in Genesis 15:6,” *Hebrew Studies* 55 [2014]: 19-41). See further the comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
193. Or “I Yahweh am the one who” (cf. Seebass, *Genesis* 2/1:72). Having no equivalent to a noun clause, English cannot represent the Hebrew expression in its openness. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. Literally, “a heifer that is made three.” TgOnq takes *mᵉšullešet* each time to mean “threefold.” [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. The infinitive precedes the finite verb for emphasis: literally, “with knowing you may know.” [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. MT puts the mid-verse marker at this point, indicating plausibly that the 400 years covers the whole stay not just the time of humbling. [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. The declarative/performative qatal suggests a speech act, “I hereby give”; contrast the yiqtol in 12:7 (Seebass, *Genesis* 2/1:77). [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. For MT *nahar* TgOnq has the more usual *naḥal* “wadi.” [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. SP, LXX add the Hivvite (cf. 10:17)—whom one would indeed expect in the list (e.g., Exod 3:8, 17; 13:5). [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
200. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 111-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
201. Coats, *Genesis*, 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
202. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 176, 182. J. Ha (*Genesis 15* [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989], 30-33) surveys consequent source-critical and redactional approaches to the chapter, though his major thesis is that Gen 15 is a kind of “theological compendium” to the Pentateuchal history as a whole. R. Fidler (“Genesis xv,” *VT* 57 [2007]: 162-80) suggests that vv. 7-18 backtracks on vv. 1-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. See Brichto, *The Names of God*, 203-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
204. Cf. TgNeoph’s observation that this is “a word of prophecy.” In source-critical terms, it is thus one of the indications that this story comes in part from the Elohistic material about Abraham. [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
205. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 444. [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
206. Zimmerli, *1. Mose 12—25*, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
207. Cf. Fretheim, *Abraham*, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
208. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 180; cf. Luther, *Genesis 15—20*, 29-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
209. Calvin, *Genesis* 1:413. [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
210. Cf. Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 26-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
211. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 221. [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
212. Cf. T. Römer, “Abraham’s Righteousness and Sacrifice,” *Communio Viatorum* 54 (2012): 3-15 (12). [↑](#footnote-ref-212)
213. Jean Vanier, *Man and Woman He Made Them* (London: DLT, 1985), p. 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
214. So S. B. Noegel, “A Crux and a Taunt,” in Davies/Clines (eds.), *World of Genesis*, 128-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
215. Luther, *Genesis 21—25*, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
216. See further the translation note. [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
217. See further D. M. Allen, “Genesis in James, I and 2 Peter and Jude,” in Moyise/Menken (eds.). *Genesis in the NT*, 147-65 (148-53). [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
218. Cf. Keil/Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 213-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
219. Driver, *Genesis*, 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
220. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
221. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
222. So e.g., Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*, 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
223. On “waywardness,” see also on 4:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
224. See e.g., Hamilton, *Genesis 1—17*, 430-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
225. See *ANET*, 660. Another treaty imposed on the king of Arpad is more specifically gruesome (see *ANET*, 532-33). [↑](#footnote-ref-225)
226. Alter, *Genesis*, 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-226)
227. Arnold, *Genesis*, 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-227)
228. Cf. C. Levin, “Jahwe und Abraham im Dialog,” in M. Witte (ed.), *Gott und Mensch im Dialog* (O. Kaiser Festschrift; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), 237-57(257). [↑](#footnote-ref-228)
229. On this word, see 9:8-11 and the comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-229)
230. Cf. Dillmann, *Genesis* 2:66. [↑](#footnote-ref-230)
231. Kidner, *Genesis*, 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-231)
232. Literally, “come to”; so also in v. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-232)
233. *’Ibbāneh* from *bānāh*. The verb form also hints at the word for “son,” *ben*; cf. LXX’s “so that you may father a child.” [↑](#footnote-ref-233)
234. Literally, “near the water spring” (see GK 126r). [↑](#footnote-ref-234)
235. Most SP mss have *’wy* “Oh [where]” instead of the interrogative *‘y*, which makes the envoy more compassionate (Tal, *Genesis*, 118\*). [↑](#footnote-ref-235)
236. TgOnq has “let yourself be made to serve,” which is less scandalous. [↑](#footnote-ref-236)
237. On the participle’s form see GK 94f; but JM 89j sees it rather as a cross between participle and qatal. [↑](#footnote-ref-237)
238. TgOnq has “accepted your prayer,” a rather different point. [↑](#footnote-ref-238)
239. Cf. Tg. But GK 128kl suggests “a wild donkey of a human being” (cf. Prov 15:20). *HALOT* notes the suggestion that *pere’* means “zebra.” [↑](#footnote-ref-239)
240. Tg has “she called on.” [↑](#footnote-ref-240)
241. *Rŏ’î*, a noun (see BDB, 909a). LXX, Vg imply *rō’î*, a participle with first-person suffix, as in v. 13b. [↑](#footnote-ref-241)
242. Hagar’s words are elliptical, but for the use of *’aḥărê* (usually “after”) cf. 2 Kings 14:19 (T. Booij, “Hagar’s Words in Genesis xvi 13b,” *VT* 30 [1980]: 1-7; see further K. Koenen, “Wer sieht wen?” *VT* 38 [1988]: 468-74). Vg implies *’ăḥōrê* “[seen] the back of” (cf. Exod 33:23). [↑](#footnote-ref-242)
243. While *rō’î* could be the pausal form of the noun *rŏ’î* which came earlier in the verse, it makes better sense taken as participle with first-person suffix (cf. BDB, 909a; see also Tal, *Genesis*, 119\*). [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
244. “The well of the living one, the one looking at me.” I take the name as a noun clause, like names such as Melchizedek: it then means, “The living one looks at me” or “The one who looks at me lives.” Cf. Skinner, *Genesis*, 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-244)
245. Cf. Dillmann, *Genesis* 2:68. [↑](#footnote-ref-245)
246. Reno, *Genesis*, 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-246)
247. Cf. Coats, *Genesis*, 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-247)
248. Cf. Seebass, *Genesis* 2/1:94-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-248)
249. Cf. Zimmerli, *1. Mose 12—25*, 62. 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-249)
250. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-250)
251. See e.g., Hamilton, *Genesis 1—17*, 444-45, Speiser, *Genesis*, 119-21. In Kenya, C. Shisanya says, when a man is sterile, close relatives similarly sire on his behalf, though secretly (“A Reflection on the Hagar Narratives in Genesis through the Eyes of a Kenyan Woman,” in M. Getui et al. (eds.), *Interpreting the Old Testament in Africa* (New York: Lang, 2001), 147-51 (147). D. R. Mbuwayesango gives a similar account of practice in Zimbabwe, “Childlessness and Woman-To-Woman Relationships in Genesis and in African Patriarcal [sic] Society,” *Semeia* 78 (1997): 27-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-251)
252. See P. R. Drey, “The Role of Hagar in Genesis 16,” *AUSS* 40 (2002): 179-95 (186-89). [↑](#footnote-ref-252)
253. Against Reno, *Genesis*, 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-253)
254. Cf. Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob*, 32-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-254)
255. Visotzky, *Genesis of Ethics*, 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-255)
256. Trible, *Texts of Terror,* 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-256)
257. Levenson, *Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-257)
258. De La Torre, *Genesis*, 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-258)
259. See the comment there. [↑](#footnote-ref-259)
260. D. C. Stancil, “Genesis 16:1-16; 21:8-21,” *RevExp* 91 (1994): 393-400 (394). [↑](#footnote-ref-260)
261. Cf. Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 65-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-261)
262. N. Rulon-Miller, “Hagar,” in Davies/Clines (eds.), *World of Genesis*, 60-89 (60). [↑](#footnote-ref-262)
263. See J. Splawn, “‘Reckless Eyeballing,” *Feminist Theology* 21 (2012): 173-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-263)
264. Trible, *Texts of Terror,* 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-264)
265. Mbuvi, *Belonging in Genesis*, 116, 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-265)
266. See *ANET*, 172; Hays, *Hidden Riches*, 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-266)
267. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-267)
268. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-268)
269. Luther, *Genesis 15—20*, 53-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-269)
270. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-270)
271. Zimmerli, *1. Mose 12—25*, 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-271)
272. Cf. Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion*, 139-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-272)
273. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-273)
274. Cf. Fretheim, *Abraham*, 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-274)
275. De La Torre, *Genesis*, 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-275)
276. Cf. M. Masenya, “A Bosadi (Womanhood) Reading of Genesis 16,” *OTE* 11 (1998): 271-87 (282). [↑](#footnote-ref-276)
277. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-277)
278. Cf. Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum*, 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-278)
279. Cf. Mbuvi, *Belonging in Genesis*, 127 [↑](#footnote-ref-279)
280. Arnold, *Genesis*, 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-280)
281. Levenson, *Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-281)
282. B. L. Tanner, “My Sister Sarah,” in L. Day and C. Pressler (eds.), *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World* (K. D. Sakenfeld Festschrift; Louisville: WJK, 2006), 60-72 (67-68). [↑](#footnote-ref-282)
283. Fretheim, *Abraham*, 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-283)
284. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 244. [↑](#footnote-ref-284)
285. See e.g., Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 245-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-285)
286. Cf. Willett, *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum*, 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-286)
287. Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*, 180. The words are thus not inherently pejorative (cf. C. Heard, “On the Road to Paran,” *Interpretation* 68 [2014]: 270-85 [277-79]). [↑](#footnote-ref-287)
288. Cf. E. Noort, “Created in the Image of the Son,” in van Ruiten et al. (eds.), *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites*, 33- 44 (35). [↑](#footnote-ref-288)
289. Cf. P. Trible, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984)*,* 18. See further M. Egger, *“Hagar”* (Freiburg: Herder, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-289)
290. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-290)
291. Cf. Hamilton, *Genesis 1—17*, 458. [↑](#footnote-ref-291)
292. Coats, *Genesis*, 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-292)
293. Cf. J. Magonet, *Bible Lives* (London: SCM, 1992), 25; R. Crotty (“The Near Sacrifice of Isaac,” in Cadwallader/Trudiger [eds.], *Where the Wild Ox Roams*, 192-209 [194]) neatly adds the genealogies in 11:10-32 and 25:18 to the structure, though the plausibility of this addition depends on seeing 23:1—24:67 as later additions. [↑](#footnote-ref-293)
294. Cf. J. Goldingay, “The Place of Ishmael,” in Davies/Clines (eds.), *World of Genesis*, 146-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-294)
295. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 153. Cf. N. M. Simopoulos, “Who Was Hagar?” in G. O. West (ed.), *Reading Other-wise* (Atlanta: SBL, 2007), 63-72. Contrast J. C. Okoye, “Sarah and Hagar,” *JSOT* 32 (2007): 163-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-295)
296. Cf. H. Angel, “Sarah’s Treatment of Hagar,” *JBQ* 41 (2013): 211-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-296)
297. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-297)
298. See D. T. Adamo and E. F. Eghwubare, “The African Wife of Abraham,” in Brenner et al. (eds.), *Genesis*, 275-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-298)
299. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-299)
300. Cf. D. S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 4 (see further15-33); also De La Torre, *Genesis*, 171; Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 9-35; Y. Sherwood, “Hagar and Ishmael,” *Interpretation* 68 (2014): 286-304; S. R. Andrews, “Genesis 16:1-16,” *Interpretation* 68 (2014): 305-7. E. Durant (“It’s Complicated,” *Conversations with the Biblical World* 35 [2015]: 78-93) reflects on the task of interpreting the text when one does not belong to the margins. [↑](#footnote-ref-300)
301. Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-301)
302. For Africa itself, see C. Shisanya, “A reflection on the Hagar Narratives in Genesis through the Eyes of a Kenyan Woman,” in M. Getui et al. (eds.), *Interpreting the Old Testament in Africa* (New York: Lang, 2001), 147-51; and for Iraq, Sherwood, “Hagar and Ishmael,” 302. [↑](#footnote-ref-302)
303. D. S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-303)
304. K. D. Sakenfeld, *Just Wives* (Louisville: WJK, 2003), 7-25 (7, 21-22). [↑](#footnote-ref-304)
305. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 16. But the discussion of “Hagar and Ismael” above notes that the concentric structure of Gen 12—22 works against that suggestion. [↑](#footnote-ref-305)
306. A cohortative follows on the imperative—you bind yourself to acting and I then bind myself to acting (cf. *IBHS* 34.6). [↑](#footnote-ref-306)
307. The performative/declaratory qatal suggests a speech act, “I hereby make you” (cf. Seebass, *Genesis* 2/1:97), followed by *waw*-consecutives; the sequence recurs in vv. 16 and 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-307)
308. MT moves to plural “you” at this point; LXX has singular here but plural later in the verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-308)
309. For *lākem* LXX, Vg have “[every male] of you,” but the word order suggests something more like *lᵉ* of agency as in 14:17; 31:15 (cf. BDB 514a; R. Althann, “*mwl*, ‘Circumcise,’ with the *lamedh* of Agency,” *Biblica* 62 [1981]: 239-40). [↑](#footnote-ref-309)
310. On the form of the verb and the construction, see GK 67dd, 121d. [↑](#footnote-ref-310)
311. The infinitive precedes the finite verb for emphasis: literally, “with circumcising he is to be circumcised.” [↑](#footnote-ref-311)
312. LXX adds “on the eighth day,” which M. Thiessen (“The Text of Genesis 17:14,” *JBL* 128 [2009]: 625-42) suggests is the older reading. [↑](#footnote-ref-312)
313. LXX “scattered,” Vg “made invalid,” EVV “broken” over-translate. *Pārar* hiphil is the opposite of *šāmar* (v. 9), not the opposite of *qûm* hiphil (cf. Skinner, *Genesis*, 293). [↑](#footnote-ref-313)
314. More literally, “she will be nations; kings of peoples from her will be”—complementary clauses that work by parataxis in abb’a’ order. In v. 16b some LXX mss, Vg have “bless him… he will become… from him” (cf. Tal, *Genesis*, 120\*). [↑](#footnote-ref-314)
315. *Jub* 15:17 and Tg have “rejoiced” or “wondered.” [↑](#footnote-ref-315)
316. The double question is formulated in an odd way, highlighting the expression of incredulity (GK 150g). [↑](#footnote-ref-316)
317. LXX, Vg translate *wayya‘al* more literally, “went up,” but the verb can refer (e.g.) to enemies withdrawing (e.g., 1 Kings 15:19), and it does not imply God going up into the heavens—God did not come down from there (v. 1). God “appears” rather than “comes down,” except in connection with Sinai. [↑](#footnote-ref-317)
318. The *’et* which appears in vv. 11, 14, 25 does not appear here (SP supplies it). [↑](#footnote-ref-318)
319. Cf. e.g., Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-319)
320. Cf. Coats, *Genesis*, 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-320)
321. Cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 263. [↑](#footnote-ref-321)
322. Wenham further details the development in the promises (*Genesis 16—50*, 16-17). [↑](#footnote-ref-322)
323. Cf. the discussion of “The Promise of Land” at the end of the comments on Gen 15 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-323)
324. And see the extensive expansion of Gen 17 in *Jub* 15 (see e.g., Segal, *The Book of Jubilees,* 229-45; van Ruiten, *Abraham in the Book of Jubilees*,137-67). [↑](#footnote-ref-324)
325. Cf. van Dijk-Hemmes, *The Double Voice of Her Desire*, 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-325)
326. But it’s also been suggested that the original P version of the story lacked the rule about circumcision in vv. 9-14: see Seebass, *Genesis* 2/1:111-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-326)
327. Origen, *Genesis and Exodus*, 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-327)
328. Cf. Speiser, *Genesis*, 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-328)
329. Cf. Seebass, *Genesis* 2/1:100. But also see further the comments on 49:25a. [↑](#footnote-ref-329)
330. Cf. Driver, *Genesis*, 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-330)
331. Andrew of Saint Victor, *Exposition on Genesis*,as quoted in Schroeder, *Genesis*, 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-331)
332. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 259. See further the comments on 9:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-332)
333. Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-333)
334. Blenkinsopp, *Abraham*, 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-334)
335. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 263. [↑](#footnote-ref-335)
336. Cf. J. Niehaus, “God’s Covenant with Abraham,” *JETS* 56 (2013): 249-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-336)
337. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-337)
338. Cf. von Rad, *Genesis,* 194-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-338)
339. See e.g., *HALOT*. [↑](#footnote-ref-339)
340. Cf. Coats, *Genesis*, 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-340)
341. Zimmerli, *1. Mose 12—25*, 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-341)
342. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 459. [↑](#footnote-ref-342)
343. See D. S. Diffey, “The Royal Promise in Genesis,” *TynB* 62 (2011): 313-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-343)
344. Cf. Skinner, *Genesis*, 293. [↑](#footnote-ref-344)
345. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-345)
346. Hamilton, *Genesis 1—17*, 470. [↑](#footnote-ref-346)
347. R. H. Sohn, in Eskenazi/Weiss (eds.). *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-347)
348. Kidner, *Genesis*, 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-348)
349. See H. Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990), 141-76 for this emphasis on the significance of circumcision. [↑](#footnote-ref-349)
350. See the comments on 15:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-350)
351. Cf. Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*, 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-351)
352. Hamilton, *Genesis 1—17*, 473. [↑](#footnote-ref-352)
353. R. S. Sabbath, “Sacred Tropes,” in R. S. Sabbath (ed.), *Sacred Tropes* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 349-60 (359). [↑](#footnote-ref-353)
354. Kidner, *Genesis*, 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-354)
355. See the comments on 15:18 on “with” and “for”; and *DCH*, 266b on the possible implications of the “for.” [↑](#footnote-ref-355)
356. Cf. Alter, *Genesis*, 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-356)
357. Cf. Barth, *Dogmatics* II, 2:355. [↑](#footnote-ref-357)
358. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-358)
359. Cf. Brayford, *Genesis*, 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-359)
360. Against Fretheim, *Abraham*, 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-360)
361. Cf. e.g., K. Grünwaldt, *Exil und Identität* (Frankfurt: Hain, 1992), 9-70; the description is Brett’s (*Genesis*, 63-64). [↑](#footnote-ref-361)
362. Cf. Hamilton, *Genesis 1—17*, 480. [↑](#footnote-ref-362)
363. Cf. De La Torre, *Genesis*, 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-363)
364. Cf. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 459, 460. [↑](#footnote-ref-364)
365. Fretheim, *Abraham*, 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-365)
366. See the comments on 15:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-366)
367. Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum*, 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-367)
368. Reno, *Genesis*, 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-368)
369. Ambrose, *On Abraham* 2.11.78-79 as quoted in Sheridan (ed.), *Genesis 12—50*, 55. Cf. Philo, *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 3:47. [↑](#footnote-ref-369)
370. See J. Goldingay, “The Significance of Circumcision,” *JSOT* 88 (2000): 3–18. [↑](#footnote-ref-370)
371. Reno, *Genesis*, 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-371)
372. W. Brueggemann, “Genesis 17:1-22,” *Interpretation* 45 (1991): 55-59 (56). [↑](#footnote-ref-372)
373. Cf. J. Fleischman, “On the Significance of a Name Change and Circumcision in **Genesis** 17,” *JANES* 28 (2001): 19-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-373)
374. See T. W. Martin, “The Covenant of Circumcision,” *JBL* 122 (2003): 111-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-374)
375. Ironically, given Paul’s polemic elsewhere (Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 155-56). [↑](#footnote-ref-375)
376. Calvin (*Genesis* 1:468) considers this possibility, though he then “prefers” to see these events as subsequent to the previous revelation. [↑](#footnote-ref-376)
377. Cf. Luther, *Genesis 15—20*, 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-377)
378. Not naming Abraham at the beginning of the chapter suggests continuity with what precedes and fits with the idea that 18:1-15 is another account of the same incident as Gen 17 (see the comment). [↑](#footnote-ref-378)
379. *’Ădōnāy* is the form for addressing “the Lord” (cf. vv. 27, 30, 31, 32), and “you” in the rest of v. 3 is singular; the spelling reminds the audience that Abraham is addressing “the Lord.” But vv. 1-15 as a whole give the impression that he doesn’t know it yet, and a switch between plural and singular recurs through the section. In 19:2 Lot uses *’ădōnay* as the form of address to the two “men” (LXX, Vg, Tg switch there from “Lord” to “lords”). When *’ădōnāy* recurs in 19:18 it is in pause, which might explain the pointing; it could be understood as “Lord” or “lords.” The short spelling (*ō* not *ô*), in all three verses, is the form usual in references to God rather than to human lords. But conversely, Judg 13:8 has the long spelling *’ădônāy* in address to Yahweh. [↑](#footnote-ref-379)
380. We don’t know the size of a “measure” (*sᵉ’āh*). [↑](#footnote-ref-380)
381. Or perhaps “a boy” (cf. GK 126r). Otherwise, it might almost make one think of Ishmael (cf. Qimchi’s comment, *Genesis*, on the verse). [↑](#footnote-ref-381)
382. Taking *ḥayyāh* as the noun meaning “life” (cf. Vg, TgOnq, TgPsJ?); it might alternatively be a feminine adjective (thus “the time [when she is] alive/pregnant/recovering [after giving birth]”): see e.g., Sarna, *Genesis*, 130; *DTT*, 451-52). LXX lets the allusive expression be a vaguer reference to “next year.” [↑](#footnote-ref-382)
383. The verb is qatal. See GK 106n. [↑](#footnote-ref-383)
384. Vg translates the hapax *‘ednāh* “pleasure,” but etymological considerations rather suggest something like abundance and a link with *’ēden* (see the comment on 2:8) and thus hint that Sarah is asking whether there could be any possibility of recapturing Eden (cf. A. R. Davis, “Eden Revisited,” *CBQ* 78 (2016): 611-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-384)
385. Unusually, to refer to her husband Sarah uses the word for “lord” instead of the more usual expression *’îšî*, literally “my man” (e.g., 29:32). [↑](#footnote-ref-385)
386. On *w-*clauses in Genesis followed by a pronoun or noun preceding the verb, with such an implication, see Osborne, “Anteriority and Justification.” [↑](#footnote-ref-386)
387. The placing of the subject before the verb indicates that a new theme is being introduced here. [↑](#footnote-ref-387)
388. On the translation, see the footnote to 12:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-388)
389. LXX, Vg “I know that” disregards the suffix “him” and the *lᵉma‘an*; more likely *yāda‘* has its idiomatic meaning. [↑](#footnote-ref-389)
390. E. J. van Wolde (“Outcry, Knowledge, and Judgment in Genesis 18—19,” in Lipton [ed.], *Universalism and Particularism at Sodom and Gomorrah*, 71-100) argues for the more obvious translation “the outcry *of* Sodom and Gomorrah,” but it is hard to make sense of, especially in 19:13. Commentators such as Driver (*Genesis*, 196) and Seebass (*Genesis* 2/1:117) thus argue for “the outcry *about* Sodom and Gomorrah.” [↑](#footnote-ref-390)
391. Putting the subjects before the “because” gives them focus (Bandstra, “Word Order and Emphasis,” 121). [↑](#footnote-ref-391)
392. For the expression *‘āśāh kālāh* see e.g., Jer 4:27; 5:10, though it usually refers to God’s bringing about such destruction (cf. Tg here). LXX, Vg imply that here alone it means “acted totally.” [↑](#footnote-ref-392)
393. See the footnote to v. 20—which had *zᵉ‘āqāh*, while v. 21 has *ṣᵉ‘āqāh*, but there seems to be no significance in the alternation. [↑](#footnote-ref-393)
394. According to a note in *GenR* 49:7, the text originally read “Yahweh stood before Abraham”; scribes then thought this daring reading could not be right and emended it, and it is one of the eighteen such “corrections of the scribes” in the First Testament (see C. McCarthy, *The Tiqqune Sopherim* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1981]). “Regardless of the original word order—Abraham standing before Yahweh or vice versa – the narrator’s voice here creates a slight pause in the action, as though Abraham were pondering whether or not to speak up” (Arnold, *Genesis*, 182). [↑](#footnote-ref-394)
395. *Nāśā’* with an object such as waywardness can in effect mean “forgive,” but here the verb is followed by *lᵉ* (the two usages come together in Num 14:18-19). TgOnq*,* LXX have “let go,” Vg “spare” here. [↑](#footnote-ref-395)
396. “In no way” (LXX) or “far be it from you” (Vg) under-translate *ḥālilāh* (see BDB). [↑](#footnote-ref-396)
397. EVV have something like “Isn’t the one who exercises authority… to act justly,” but this translation obscures Abraham’s use of the verb *šāpaṭ* and then the related noun *mišpāṭ*. “The Heb. is more pointed and forcible than the English: 'shall not the *judge* of all the earth do *judgement*?’—do what the title which He bears implies” (Driver, *Genesis*, 197). [↑](#footnote-ref-397)
398. *‘Ānāh* usually means “respond,” but in some passages there is nothing to “respond” to and the verb can carry the connotation of avow or testify in a formal sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-398)
399. A hendiadys inspired by paronomasia (*‘āpār wᵉ’ēper*). [↑](#footnote-ref-399)
400. On the verb, see the comment on 4:1. But R. Pirson, for instance (“Does Lot Know about *Yada‘*,” in Lipton, *Universalism and Particularism at Sodom and Gomorrah*, 203-13) thinks that *yāda‘* is at least ambiguous here and does not clearly refer to sex, as it does in v. 8 as well as 4:1. Cf. B. Doyle, “The Sin of Sodom,” *Theology and Sexuality* 9 (1998): 84-100; R. C. Bailey, “Why Do Readers Believe Lot?” *OTE* 23 (2010): 519-48. [↑](#footnote-ref-400)
401. LXX, Vg have “get away over there,” but the use of the verb *nāgaš* is then odd, and it has its regular meaning later in the verse (see C. Heard, “What Does the Mob Want Lot to Do in Genesis 19:9?” *Hebrew Studies* 51 [2010]: 95-105). [↑](#footnote-ref-401)
402. The infinitive precedes the finite verb for emphasis: literally, “with judging he’s judging.” [↑](#footnote-ref-402)
403. See the footnote to 18:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-403)
404. Cf. LXX, TgPsJ for the past translation of the participle; contrast Vg. [↑](#footnote-ref-404)
405. See the footnote to 18:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-405)
406. Literally, “I have lifted your face”; the declarative/performative qatal suggests a speech act, “I hereby accept.” [↑](#footnote-ref-406)
407. The verb is singular, “one named.” [↑](#footnote-ref-407)
408. Literally, “the cave” (see GK 126r). [↑](#footnote-ref-408)
409. In isolation, one might translate *bā’āreṣ* “in the region” (cf. v. 28), but *hā’āreṣ* later in the sentence has to mean “world.” [↑](#footnote-ref-409)
410. Literally, “to come on us.” [↑](#footnote-ref-410)
411. Cf. R. I. Letellier, *Day in Mamre, Night in Sodom* (Leiden: Brill, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-411)
412. Fretheim, *Abraham*, 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-412)
413. Fretheim, *Abraham*, 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-413)
414. Cf. Coats, *Genesis*, 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-414)
415. Cf. e.g. Zimmerli, *1. Mose 12—25*, 81-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-415)
416. See further e.g., W. J. Lyons, *Canon and Exegesis* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 137-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-416)
417. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 162 (most of both sentences is in italics). [↑](#footnote-ref-417)
418. Cf. Coats, *Genesis*, 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-418)
419. Coats, *Genesis*, 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-419)
420. Reno, *Genesis*, 186; cf. Origen’s contrast, *Genesis and Exodus*, 103-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-420)
421. Cf. Seebass, Genesis 2/1:139. [↑](#footnote-ref-421)
422. *Br’šyt*, 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-422)
423. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-423)
424. Skinner, *Genesis*, 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-424)
425. Cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-425)
426. Brayford, *Genesis*, 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-426)
427. Cf. Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-427)
428. Cf. Zimmerli, *1. Mose 12—25*, 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-428)
429. E.g., Keil/Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-429)
430. Cf. Calvin, *Genesis* 1:469. [↑](#footnote-ref-430)
431. Cf. A. Abela, “The Inversion of Genesis 18:7a,” *Bible Translator* 60 (2009): 1-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-431)
432. Luther, *Genesis 15—20*, 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-432)
433. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-433)
434. Cf. the discussion in Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*, 192-94. [↑](#footnote-ref-434)
435. Barth, *Dogmatics* III, 4:666. [↑](#footnote-ref-435)
436. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 158, 159, 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-436)
437. Cf. Fretheim, *Abraham*, 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-437)
438. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-438)
439. Cf. N. MacDonald, “Listening to Abraham—Listening to Yhwh,” *CBQ* 66 (2004): 25-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-439)
440. See H. B. Huffmon, “The Treaty Background of Hebrew *Yāda‘*,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 181 (1966): 31-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-440)
441. Cf. M. Warner, “Keeping the Way of Yhwh,” in Lipton (ed.), *Universalism and Particularism at Sodom and Gomorrah*, 113-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-441)
442. On the importance of that theme in Gen 19, see B. N. Peterson, “The Sin of Sodom Revisited,” *JETS* 59 (2016): 17-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-442)
443. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-443)
444. Cf. Keil/Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 230; contrast TgPsJ. [↑](#footnote-ref-444)
445. Contrast the discussion in Lyons, *Canon and Exegesis*, 186-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-445)
446. Dershowitz, *Genesis of Justice*, 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-446)
447. See McDonald, “Listening to Abraham—Listening to Yhwh,” 30-35; E. Bridge (“An Audacious Request,” *JSOT* 40 [2016]: 281-96) considers the passage in light of “politeness theory.” [↑](#footnote-ref-447)
448. The verb there was piel rather than hiphil, but it was hiphil in 6:13 and the piel will recur here in 19:13, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-448)
449. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 53. For other possible answers, Lyons, *Canon and Exegesis*, 211-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-449)
450. Cf. Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*, 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-450)
451. See further J. Blenkinsopp, “The Judge of All the Earth,” *JJS* 41 (1990):1-12 (9-10). [↑](#footnote-ref-451)
452. Cf. D. Lipton, “The Limits of Intercession,” in Lipton (ed.), *Universalism and Particularism at Sodom and Gomorrah*, 25-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-452)
453. See the comment on 16:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-453)
454. But see the footnote to 18:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-454)
455. On Abraham and Lot as hosts, see Y. Peleg, “Was Lot a Good Host?” J. D. Safren, “Hospitality Compared,” and N. MacDonald, “Hospitality and Hostility,” in Lipton (ed.), *Universalism and Particularism at Sodom and Gomorrah*, 129-56, 157-78, 179-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-455)
456. Cf. B. Doyle, “‘Knock, Knock, Knockin’ on Sodom’s Door,’” *JSOT* 28 (2004): 431-48 (446). On the possibility that heterosexual wishes lie behind the passage, see also P. Vandermeersch, “Sodomites, Gays and Biblical Scholars,” in E. Noort and E. Tigchelaar (eds.), *Sodom’s Sin* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 151-71. H. J. Toensing (“Women of Sodom and Gomorrah,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 21 [2005]: 61-74) considers various aspects of the role and position of women in Gen 19, but not this one. [↑](#footnote-ref-456)
457. Cf. Fretheim, *Abraham*, 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-457)
458. As far as we know it was Philo who first identified the sin of Sodom as homosexuality, specifically homosexual rape(*On Abraham* 27:137; cf. De La Torre, *Genesis*, 194). See also M. Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 45-49, 93-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-458)
459. See e.g., R. Hendel et al., “Gender and Sexuality,” in Hendel (ed.), *Reading Genesis*, 71-91 (84); L. M. Bechtel, “Boundary Issues in Genesis 19.1-38,” in Washington et al. (eds.), *Escaping Eden*, 22-40; S. E. Waters, “Reading Sodom through Sexual Violence Against Women, *Interpretation* 71 (2017): 274-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-459)
460. Cf. L. M. Bechtel, “A Feminist Reading of Genesis 19.1-11,” in Brenner (ed.), *Genesis*, *108-28.* [↑](#footnote-ref-460)
461. So e.g., Gunkel, *Genesis*, 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-461)
462. See S. Morschauser, “‘Hospitality,’ Hostiles and Hostages,” *JSOT* 27 (2003): 461-85 (474-82); it is one aspect of a broader reconfiguring of 19:1-9 as a juridical event. [↑](#footnote-ref-462)
463. On the significance of the resident alien motif in Gen 19, see W. W. Fields, *Sodom and Gomorrah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 27-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-463)
464. Brett, *Genesis*, 67-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-464)
465. Brayford, *Genesis*, 319. [↑](#footnote-ref-465)
466. Van Wolde (“Outcry, Knowledge, and Judgment in Genesis 18—19”) thus locates Sodom’s outcry (18:20) in this protest. [↑](#footnote-ref-466)
467. Cf. Lyons, *Canon and Exegesis*, 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-467)
468. L. A. Turner, “Lot as Jekyll and Hyde,” in D. J. A. Clines et al. (eds.), *The Bible in Three Dimensions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 85-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-468)
469. See G. Dishi, “Saving Zoar,” *JBQ* 38 (2010): 211-18; P. Tonson, “Mercy without Covenant,” *JSOT* 95 (2001): 95-116. [↑](#footnote-ref-469)
470. Cf. Cyril of Alexandria, as quoted in Petit (ed.), *La chaîne sur la Genèse* 3:156;cf. Sheridan (ed.), *Genesis 12—50*, 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-470)
471. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 306. [↑](#footnote-ref-471)
472. Cf. Qimchi, on the passage. [↑](#footnote-ref-472)
473. R. Goldstein, “Looking Back at Lot’s Wife,” *Commentary* 34/3 (1992): 37-41 (41); cf. S. Cheon’s reading of the story in light of a Korean legend (“Filling the Gap in the Story of Lot’s Wife,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 15 [2001]: 13-23). [↑](#footnote-ref-473)
474. So S. Luger, “Flood, Salt and Sacrifice,” *JBQ* 38 (2010): 124-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-474)
475. So Keil/Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 236. [↑](#footnote-ref-475)
476. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 48, summarizing R. T. Boyd, *Tells, Tombs, and Treasure* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), 85-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-476)
477. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-477)
478. Cf. Lyons, *Canon and Exegesis*, 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-478)
479. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50,* 45, though in source-critical terms it points to P. [↑](#footnote-ref-479)
480. Sarna, *Genesis*, 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-480)
481. Brett, *Genesis*, 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-481)
482. Andrew of Saint Victor, *Exposition on Genesis*,as quoted in Schroeder, *Genesis*, 151; contrast Jerome’s incredulity at the idea of a man having sex without realizing (*Hebrew Questions on Genesis*, 52; see further Hayward’s comments, 171-72). Ephrem has an imaginative midrash on how the two women deceived their father so as to get him drunk and then deceived him about the source of their pregnancy (“Commentary on Genesis,”163-64). [↑](#footnote-ref-482)
483. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-483)
484. J. Grossman, “‘Associative Meanings’ in the Character Evaluation of Lot's Daughters,” *CBQ* 76 (2014): 40-57 (57)—Grossman thinks the narrator is more sympathetic to the younger daughter. Cf. also M. Hunt, “The Two Daughters of Lot,” *Lutheran Theological Journal* 47 (2013): 173-186. [↑](#footnote-ref-484)
485. Hendel et al., “Gender and Sexuality,” 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-485)
486. Ephrem has them assuming that the catastrophe was as devastating as the deluge in the time of Noah (“Commentary on Genesis,” 162; cf. Wickes, “Ephrem’s Interpretation of Genesis,” 52). [↑](#footnote-ref-486)
487. Origen, *Genesis and Exodus*, 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-487)
488. Brett, *Genesis*, 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-488)
489. Cf. W. J. Lyons, “The Eternal Liminality of Lot,” in Lipton (ed.), *Universalism and Particularism at Sodom and Gomorrah*, 3-23 (13). C. Carmichael (“Legal and Ethical Reflections on Genesis 18 and 19,” in the same volume, 101-11) makes links with Lev 18:7; Deut 23:2-6, but the former speaks of sons and mothers and the latter provides a different rationale from a link with Gen 19. Fields (*Sodom and Gomorrah*, 147-52) rather links the story with enmity between Israel and Moab/Ammon. On the ambiguity of the First Testament’s attitude to Moab and Ammon, see also E. Noort, “Abraham and the Nations,” in van Ruiten et al. (eds.), *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites*, 3-31 (14-17). [↑](#footnote-ref-489)
490. Seebass, *Genesis* 2/1:157. [↑](#footnote-ref-490)
491. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 18-45*, 464-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-491)
492. Visotzky, *Genesis of Ethics*, 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-492)
493. See further R. Carlson’s comments on Yahweh as the subject of the verb *yāda‘* in Gen 18—19, “The Open God of the Sodom and Gomorrah Cycle,” *JPT* 21 (2012): 185-200 (191-92). [↑](#footnote-ref-493)
494. *Genesis 15—20*, 177, 190. Reno (*Genesis*, 183) supports the Trinitarian understanding. [↑](#footnote-ref-494)
495. *Genesis*, 189-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-495)
496. *City of God* 16:29 (see more broadly M. E. Doerfler, “Entertaining the Trinity Unawares,” *Journal of Ecclesiastic History* 65 [2014]: 485-503); cf. Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum*, 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-496)
497. Luther, *Genesis 15—20*, 194-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-497)
498. Cf. E. Hamori, “Divine Embodiment in the Hebrew Bible,” in S. T. Kamionkowski and W. Kim (eds.), *Bodies, Embodiment, and Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Clark, 2010), 161-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-498)
499. On ways of handling such questions, see Lyons, *Canon and Exegesis*, 151-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-499)
500. See e.g., Tg; Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 18-45*, 426-29; Calvin, *Genesis* 1:487-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-500)
501. See Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 167-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-501)
502. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 291; cf. E. Ben Zvi, “The Dialogue between Abraham and Yhwh,” *JSOT* 53 (1992): 27-46; T. Miller, “Relationships, Haggling, and Injustice in Genesis 18,” *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa* 36/2 (2012) 29-38 [↑](#footnote-ref-502)
503. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 207, 208, 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-503)
504. Luther, *Genesis 15—20*, 235. [↑](#footnote-ref-504)
505. Cf. Fretheim, *Abraham*, 85-86.d [↑](#footnote-ref-505)
506. So Dershowitz, *Genesis of Justice*, 71-72. [↑](#footnote-ref-506)
507. Cf. Fretheim, *Abraham*, 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-507)
508. Calvin, *Genesis* 1:488-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-508)
509. See further Lipton, “The Limits of Intercession”; J. Blenkinsopp, “Abraham and the Righteous of Sodom,” *JJS* 33 (1982): 119-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-509)
510. So Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 162-76; though Ben Zvi (“The Dialogue between Abraham and Yhwh,” 45) and T. M. Bolin, “The Role of Exchange in Ancient Mediterranean Religion and Its Implications for Reading Genesis 18—19,” *JSOT* 29 [2004]: 37-56) seem to imply that the critique works in the opposite direction. [↑](#footnote-ref-510)
511. See also MacDonald’s comments, “Listening to Abraham—Listening to Yhwh,” 38-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-511)
512. See the footnote to 12:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-512)
513. Appositely, given the similarity of the name to the verb *gûr*. [↑](#footnote-ref-513)
514. The use of *’el* with this sense is unusual (Tal, *Genesis*, 126\*). [↑](#footnote-ref-514)
515. LXX adds an explanation based on 26:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-515)
516. Less colloquially, “you are going to die.” [↑](#footnote-ref-516)
517. Literally “she is owned by an owner,” using the verb *bā‘al* and the noun *ba‘al*, the more legal term for a husband (e.g. Exod 21:3; Deut 22:22; cf. Sarah’s use of the noun *’ādōn* in 18:12). [↑](#footnote-ref-517)
518. For the verb referring to sex, see e.g., Deut 22:14; Isa 8:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-518)
519. Literally, “in my palms/fists.” [↑](#footnote-ref-519)
520. As in 2:17 God uses the idiom which combines an infinitive and its cognate finite verb, to indicate emphasis; the idiom recurs with another verb in v. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-520)
521. Although “were very frightened” would follow from the threat in v. 7, and Abimelek is surely making clear that he intends to take the appropriate action, reference to a positive awe leads with irony into v. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-521)
522. To Abimelek the plural verb would suggest “gods” (cf. Alter, *Genesis*, 95),but see 31:53 (Laban); 35:7 (Jacob); cf. GK 145i. The verb itself is also scandalous; Tg turn the nations into the subject. See the discussion in A. J. Schmutzer, “Did the Gods Cause Abraham’s Wandering?” *JSOT* 35 (2010): 149-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-522)
523. The preposition *’el* is slightly odd (though see BDB, 40b); perhaps its use was influenced by the idea of motion towards in the context. [↑](#footnote-ref-523)
524. For this meaning of *māqôm* see Exod 3:8; 23:20. LXX has “every place” for *kol-hammāqôm*, but the article would make that meaning unique (as GK127e notes). [↑](#footnote-ref-524)
525. The declarative/performative qatal suggests a speech act, “I hereby give.” [↑](#footnote-ref-525)
526. *Wᵉ’ēt kōl wᵉnōkāḥat* is widely regarded as unintelligible (e.g., Tal, *Genesis*, 128\*), though the general sense is clear. I take *’ēt* as the preposition rather than the sign of the object. *Nōkāḥat* is a feminine niphal participle whose subject is Sarah, though the participle has no antecedent; adding a shewa at the end turns it into second-person qatal (cf. BDB). [↑](#footnote-ref-526)
527. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-527)
528. Cf. Van Seters’s comments, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, 171-75; and I. N. Rashkow, “Intertextuality, Transference, and the Reader in/of Genesis 12 and 20,” in Nolan Fewell (ed.), *Reading between Texts*, 57-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-528)
529. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-529)
530. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-530)
531. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-531)
532. See Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 318-19, 324. [↑](#footnote-ref-532)
533. For alternative critical theories, see e.g., Liptpn, *Revisions of the Night*, 35-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-533)
534. See e.g., W. Hanna and [J. P.] Norris, *The Patriarchs* (London: Cassell, 1879), 71-81; and cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 218-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-534)
535. So Qimchi, *Genesis*, on the verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-535)
536. So e.g., Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum*, 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-536)
537. Cf. Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion*, 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-537)
538. Qimchi, *Genesis*, on v. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-538)
539. Cf. Seebass, *Genesis* 2/1:164-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-539)
540. KSG; and cf. the comment on 12:14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-540)
541. Cf. Kidner, *Genesis*, 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-541)
542. Cf. von Rad, *Genesis*, 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-542)
543. Arnold, *Genesis*, 190; he then translates *gam* “also.” [↑](#footnote-ref-543)
544. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-544)
545. So T. Novick, “‘Almost, at Times, the Fool,’” *Prooftexts* 24 (2004): 277-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-545)
546. See F. C. Holmgren, “Looking Back on Abraham’s Encounter with a Canaanite King,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 37 (2010): 366-77. [↑](#footnote-ref-546)
547. See further R. G. Branch, “Genesis 20,” *In die Skriflig* 38 (2004):217-234;J. Todd, “Patriarch and Prophet,” *JESOT* 3 (2014): 185-202. [↑](#footnote-ref-547)
548. See e.g., Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-548)
549. Cf. Seebass, *Genesis* 2/1:166-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-549)
550. Cf. Skinner, *Genesis*, 318. [↑](#footnote-ref-550)
551. See the comment there. [↑](#footnote-ref-551)
552. Pitt-Rivers, *Fate of Shechem*, 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-552)
553. See G. Hepner, “Abraham’s Incestuous Marriage with Sarah,” *VT* 53 (2003): 143-55 (148). [↑](#footnote-ref-553)
554. See the comment on 23:15 for further comparisons. [↑](#footnote-ref-554)
555. Z. Kotze rather suggests that the covering protects from the evil eye (“An Interpretation of *kswt ‘ynym* in Genesis 20:16,” *Journal for Semitics* 20 [2011]: 487-96). [↑](#footnote-ref-555)
556. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-556)
557. Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, 125, referring to Gal 4:27; Isa 54:1; 66:8; 26:18; Gal 4:19. [↑](#footnote-ref-557)
558. The subject comes before the verb, suggesting some emphasis, and/or a contrast over against 19:30-38 (Seebass, *Genesis* 2/1:174), and/or the resumption of the theme of Yahweh’s promise from Gen 17—18 (Arnold, *Genesis*, 194). [↑](#footnote-ref-558)
559. LXX, Vg have “laugh with me.” [↑](#footnote-ref-559)
560. The rare verb *mālal* (piel), an Aramaism, could remind the audience of the verb for “circumcise,” *mûl* (v. 4)—which indeed seems to have a byform *mālal*. [↑](#footnote-ref-560)
561. One Jewish tradition infers that this “playing about” could have involved idolatry (cf. Exod 32:6), while 39:14 might imply sexual abuse or molesting, and 2 Sam 2:15 could suggest Ishmael was shooting at Isaac but claiming he was only playing (see *GenR* 53:11); see further Blenkinsopp, *Abraham*, 92-95; D. J. Zucker, “What Sarah Saw,” *JBQ* 36 (2008): 54-62. But there seems insufficient reason to interpret the playing in a negative way (see K. Sonek, *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness in Biblical Narratives* [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009], 43-47). The range of actions to which *mĕšaḥēq* might refer is less important to the narrator than the word itself (cf. Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 84). [↑](#footnote-ref-561)
562. In 16:1 she was a *šipḥāh*, here an *’āmāh*; compare “maidservant” and “handmaid” in English. Both words are also applied to Bilhah (30:3-4). Scholars who think one of the words suggest a higher status than the other (e.g., Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 237-38)are not agreed on which is which (cf. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 80); see further Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion*, 143-44; P. Y. Yoo, “Hagar the Egyptian,” *CBQ* 78 (2016): 215-35. More likely they are synonyms (see e.g., Alter, *Genesis*, 67). [↑](#footnote-ref-562)
563. On the asyndetic clause, see *TTH* 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-563)
564. That is, he also gave Ishmael to Hagar, not that he put the teenager on her shoulder along with the bread and the skin of water. The odd word order compares with 22:3 and in each passage adds emphasis to the son (L. L. Lyke, “Where Does ‘the Boy’ Belong?” *CBQ* 56 (1994): 637-48 (though I do not follow other aspects of his reading of the verse). [↑](#footnote-ref-564)
565. Literally “going away [hiphil infinitive absolute] like shooters of a bow.” [↑](#footnote-ref-565)
566. While the form of the verb *’er’eh* is ambiguous, the use of the negative *’al* establishes that it is cohortative not yiqtol, and cohortative following *’al* would naturally denote a wish “may I not watch” rather than determination not to watch (see GK 106bc; *IBHS* 34.5.1). But the logic of the verse and of her action suggest determination. Maybe she is confused. [↑](#footnote-ref-566)
567. LXX has “the child lifted up his voice [and] cried,” providing a better lead in to v. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-567)
568. More literally, “make your hand strong upon him”; not “take his hand” (Vg). [↑](#footnote-ref-568)
569. While both words are hapaxes, the first root (*rābāh*)is rare and the second more common, so the second word might explain the first. [↑](#footnote-ref-569)
570. Cf. Van Seters’s study of Gen 18 and 21 in *Abraham in History and Tradition*, 202-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-570)
571. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 180. Contrast *Jub* 16, in its way. [↑](#footnote-ref-571)
572. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 180-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-572)
573. Cf. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-573)
574. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 486. [↑](#footnote-ref-574)
575. So Gunkel, *Genesis*, 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-575)
576. Blenkinsopp, *Abraham*, 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-576)
577. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 486. [↑](#footnote-ref-577)
578. Cf. Seebass, *Genesis* 2/1:175-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-578)
579. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 338. [↑](#footnote-ref-579)
580. Cf. Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-580)
581. Cf. E. Noort, “Created in the Image of the Son,” in M. Goodman et al. (eds), *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 33-45 (42). [↑](#footnote-ref-581)
582. Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion*, 150, 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-582)
583. Cf. Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-583)
584. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 146-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-584)
585. E. Tamez, “The Woman Who Complicated the History of Salvation,” in J. S. Pobee and B. von Wartenberg-Potter (eds.), *New Eyes for Reading* (Quezon City: Claretian, 1986), 5-17 (13). [↑](#footnote-ref-585)
586. Cf. Fretheim, *Abraham*, 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-586)
587. Cf. Noort, “Created in the Image of the Son,” 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-587)
588. Cf. Fretheim, *Abraham*, 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-588)
589. De La Torre, , *Genesis*, 212, [↑](#footnote-ref-589)
590. See Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-590)
591. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 228: in those pre-gender-inclusive language days, “men” would mean “human beings.” [↑](#footnote-ref-591)
592. Mbuvi, *Belonging in Genesis*, 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-592)
593. M. Schwantes, “‘Do Not Extend Your Hand against the Child,” in L. E. Vaage (ed.), *Subversive Scriptures* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1997), 101-23 (109). [↑](#footnote-ref-593)
594. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-594)
595. Brichto, *Names of God*, 219-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-595)
596. Sonek, *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness*, 217-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-596)
597. Cf. Keil/Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 245. [↑](#footnote-ref-597)
598. A. Cohen, “Hagar and Ishmael,” *Interpretation* 68 (2014): 247-56 (252). [↑](#footnote-ref-598)
599. See further Hok-lam Chan,”‘The Distance of a Bowshot’” (Journal of Song-Yuan Studies 25 [1995]: 29-46), which allows for a similar figure. [↑](#footnote-ref-599)
600. Levenson, *Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-600)
601. Kidner, *Genesis*, 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-601)
602. Cf. J. E. Cook, “Mothers and Wives,” *Proceedings of the Great Lakes and Midwest Bible Societies* 27 (2007): 1-17 (6). [↑](#footnote-ref-602)
603. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-603)
604. Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*, 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-604)
605. Levenson, *Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-605)
606. Or perhaps the story can be read as incorporating people of the Ishmaelites’ lifestyle into Judah (so C. Horn (“Genesis 21:8-21,” *Interpretation* 68 [2014]: 308-11). [↑](#footnote-ref-606)
607. Tamez, “The Woman Who Complicated the History of Salvation,” 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-607)
608. Sherwood, “Hagar and Ishmael,”302. [↑](#footnote-ref-608)
609. The ninth century monk Raban Maur boldly but plausibly hints that one could reverse Paul’s allegory: Sarah stands for the Jewish people, Hagar for the Gentiles (“Commentariorum in Genesim Libri Quattuor,” in *PL* 107:439-670 [544-45]). See Thompson, *Reading the Bible with the Dead*, 21; Thompson surveys interpretation of the Hagar story through church history (see also J. L. Thompson, “Hagar, Victim or Villain? *CBQ* 59 [1997]: 213-33). [↑](#footnote-ref-609)
610. Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum*, 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-610)
611. Cf. F. García Martínez, “Hagar in *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan,”* in Goodman et al. (eds), *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites*, 263-74 (263). [↑](#footnote-ref-611)
612. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 490. [↑](#footnote-ref-612)
613. See I. Pardes, “Modern Literature,” in Hendel (ed.), *Reading Genesis*, 176-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-613)
614. Cf. D. S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 4 (see further15-33); Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 9-35; Tamez, “The Woman Who Complicated the History of Salvation.” [↑](#footnote-ref-614)
615. Vg has “God is with you” (cf. e.g., Zech 8:23); MT and LXX have no verb and are thus ambiguous. The Hebrew corresponds to (e.g.) Ruth 2:4, where it is a greeting, and so it is here. Contrast 26:28 where Abimelek and Pikol are looking back over what has happened in the meantime and the verb *hāyāh* appears. [↑](#footnote-ref-615)
616. The rest of the oath is left to speak for itself (cf. 14:23). [↑](#footnote-ref-616)
617. The pronoun is expressed, underlining the speaker’s commitment to the solemn promise (GK 135a). [↑](#footnote-ref-617)
618. By regular syntax *wᵉhôkiaḥ* should be past imperfect in meaning (GK 112rr sees it as frequentative), but this understanding makes poor sense in the context—vv. 25b-26 seem to refer to one event. *TTH* 133 sees the verb as another example of “isolated irregularities” like 15:6 (see the note); cf. H. W. **Hoffmann**, “Die Afformativkonjugation mit präfigiertem waw in der Genesis,” in Beck/Schorn (eds.), *Auf dem Weg zur Endgestalt von Genesis bis II Regum*, 75-88. DG 84b suggests that such an instance “identifies an event as going on at roughly the same time as a previous event.” More specifically, this instance indicates that the reproof did not happen after the previous event (*wayyiqtol* would then have been appropriate). [↑](#footnote-ref-618)
619. LXX “wells” assimilates to 26:15, 18 (Seebass, *Genesis* 2/1:188), as LXX imports Ahuzzat from 26:26. [↑](#footnote-ref-619)
620. LXX, Vg take *’ešel* to denote a field or grove (cf. Aq), TgPsJ, TgNeoph “orchard,” Sym, TgOnq “plant,” 1 Chron 10:12 (paralleling 1 Sam 31:13) a tree. Some of the variants perhaps aim to avoid giving any impression of wrongful nature-type worship (see the footnote to 12:6) (cf. Dillmann, *Genesis* 2:138). M. Umbarger argues that the tamarisk had positive “purifying, sanctifying properties” (“Abraham’s Tamarisk,” *JESOT* 1 [2012]: 189-199 [199]). [↑](#footnote-ref-620)
621. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 90.” [↑](#footnote-ref-621)
622. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 346. [↑](#footnote-ref-622)
623. See e.g., DG 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-623)
624. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-624)
625. Cf. von rad, *Genesis*, 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-625)
626. See G. L. Robinson, “The Wells of Beersheba,” *The Biblical World* 17 (1901): 247-55 (with photographs); cf. Driver, *Genesis*, 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-626)
627. Seebass, *Genesis* 2/1:189. [↑](#footnote-ref-627)
628. Cf. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 491, 492. [↑](#footnote-ref-628)
629. On this expression, see the footnote and the comment on 4:26. [↑](#footnote-ref-629)
630. Cf. Zimmerli, *1. Mose 12—25*, 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-630)
631. Cf. Coats, *Genesis*, 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-631)
632. J. L. Ska, “Genesis 22,” *Biblica* 94 (2013): 257-67 (266). [↑](#footnote-ref-632)
633. Literally, “It happened, after these things.” Chrysostom assumes that these events followed on the events in 21:1-21 (*Homilies on Genesis 46-67*, 14-15) but if anything this expression avoids any implication of this kind and suggests a chronologically indeterminate sequence (see 22:20; 39:7; 40:1; 48:1). [↑](#footnote-ref-633)
634. While the word order is that of a circumstantial clause (cf. Dillmann, *Genesis* 2:141), a number of instances of this order following a *wayᵉhî* clause look more like main clauses (e.g., 7:10; 41:1; cf. *TTH* 78). Placing the subject before the verb often does imply emphasis and/or the introduction of something “new or unexpected” (Bandstra, “Word Order and Emphasis,” 116), and this consideration combined with Genesis’s use of *hā’ĕlōhîm* rather than simple *’ĕlōhîm* suggests some emphasis on the fact that—yes, it was God, *the* God, who set this sequence of events going (cf. von Rad, *Genesis*, 233; Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 100). [↑](#footnote-ref-634)
635. Or, to be more idiomatic, “Yes?” (cf. Speiser’s comments, *Genesis*, 162). [↑](#footnote-ref-635)
636. LXX *agapēton*, “beloved,” anticipating the verb that follows, implies *yᵉdîdᵉkā* for the numerically inaccurate *yᵉḥîdᵉkā*. [↑](#footnote-ref-636)
637. Since Tyndale, English translations have transliterated *mōriyyāh*, as Vg does at 2 Chron 3:1 (TgNeoph has “Moriyyah Mountain” here), but this innovation seems implausible. The article on *hammōriyyāh* works against the assumption that the term is a name, as does the lack of reference anywhere else to “the Moriyyah region.” “Moriah” was never in common use as a name (cf. Dillmann, *Genesis* 2:142).The translation “epiphany” (for which cf. Luther’s comment on v. 14 in *Genesis 21—25*, 139) assumes a link with the key role of the verb *rā’āh* in the chapter (cf. Vg; Sym; and SP’s *hmwr’h*, “the region of the vision,” which for SP also opens up the possibility of a connection with Shechem: see 12:6); this link also appears in 2 Chron 3:1. Aq has “light,” deriving the word from *’ôr*. TgOnq has “service” in the sense of worship, reading back from v. 14 where its expansive rendering makes the connection with the temple more explicit, and where it is clearer that Tg has understood the forms from *rā’āh* there as forms from *yārē’*. *GenR* 55:7 notes that *mōriyyāh* can be linked with *tôrāh*, among other possibilities. LXX has “to the high country,” linking *mōriyyāh* with the root *rûm*. At 2 Chron 3:1 LXX has “the mountain of Amoria,” the mountain of the Amorites, which hints at another possible way of reading the text here (cf. the Syriac translation). [↑](#footnote-ref-637)
638. *Šāḥāh* hitpalel (or *ḥāwāh* eshtaphel: see *HALOT*, 1457) denotes a physical bowing down (though it doubtless implies an inner bowing down); cf. LXX’s *proskuneō* as in 18:2; 19:1. Vg *adoro* suggests “speaking” but *adoro* then comes to denote “adore/reverence” and the Hebrew verb comes to be translated “worship.” [↑](#footnote-ref-638)
639. *Ma’ăkelet* come only here, in a similar context in Judg 19:29, and in Prov 30:14, which all suggest more than an ordinary knife; it looks like a word from *’ākal*, which might suggest it is a butcher’s knife. [↑](#footnote-ref-639)
640. Not “fear of God,” which gives the wrong impression: see the comment. [↑](#footnote-ref-640)
641. For *’aḥar*, SP, LXX have *’eḥad* “one,” which would mean simply “a” (with the easy misreading of *r* for d), giving a more straightforward sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-641)
642. Reading qatal *ne’ĕḥaz* rather than participle *ne’ĕḥāz* (see Tal, *Genesis*, 131\*). [↑](#footnote-ref-642)
643. LXX’s “on the mountain the Lord was seen” implies *bāhār* for MT’s *bᵉhar*, though one could render MT itself “on Yahweh’s mountain he [Yahweh] is seen,” or “on Yahweh’s mountain one appears” (cf. Exod 23:17; see Driver, *Genesis*, 220). TgOnq thus expands the verse to refer to the worship that people will offer on this mountain (understood as Zion) in the future (see J. M. Scheetz, “Canon-Conscious Interpretation,” *OTE* 27 [2014]:263-84). Vg has “on the mountain the Lord will see,” implying a repetition of *yir’eh* instead of *yērā’eh*. [↑](#footnote-ref-643)
644. The performative/declarative qatal suggests a speech act, “I hereby swear.” [↑](#footnote-ref-644)
645. Twice God prefixes the finite verb with its infinitive, for emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-645)
646. See the footnote to 12:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-646)
647. J. Jeremias also draws parallels with the preceding story in Gen 20, “Gen 20—22 als theologisches Programm,” in Beck/Schorn (eds.), *Auf dem Weg zur Endgestalt von Genesis bis II Regum*, 59-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-647)
648. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-648)
649. Skinner, *Genesis*, 328. [↑](#footnote-ref-649)
650. LXX has Isaac as a “little boy” (cf. Brayford, *Genesis*, 330). TgPsJ works out that he is 37 by subtracting three years of Torah study (see the comment on v. 19) from his age when he marries Rebekah (25:20; *see* Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*, 81). Josephus says he was 25 (*Antiquities* I, 13:2; cf. Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum*, 199). Ibn Ezra (*Genesis*, 225) suggests he was more likely 13, which seems the best guess. [↑](#footnote-ref-650)
651. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 187, 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-651)
652. See further Moberly, *Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 97-107. [↑](#footnote-ref-652)
653. Seebass (*Genesis* 2/1:203) notes 2 Chron 32:31 and discusses other possible exceptions. [↑](#footnote-ref-653)
654. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-654)
655. *City of God* 16:32. [↑](#footnote-ref-655)
656. Cf. J. L. Mays, “Now I Know,” in W. M. Alston and M. Welker (eds.), *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity II* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 172-89: Mays brings together Gen 22 and Matt 26:36-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-656)
657. Calvin, *Genesis* 1:562. [↑](#footnote-ref-657)
658. Cf. Zimmerli, *1. Mose 12—25*, 110-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-658)
659. Coats, *Genesis*, 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-659)
660. Cf. Levenson, *Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-660)
661. Cf. Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-661)
662. De La Torre, *Genesis*, 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-662)
663. See C. A. Eberhart, “The Term ‘Sacrifice’ and the Problem of Theological Abstraction,” in C. Helmer with C. T. Higbe (eds.), *The Multivalence of Biblical Texts and Theological Meanings* (Atlanta: SBL, 2006), 47-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-663)
664. Luther, *Genesis 21—25*, 92, 94: on Luther’s exposition, see further M. Buck, “God as Tempter,” *Logia* 24 (2015): 23-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-664)
665. Calvin, *Genesis* 1:565. [↑](#footnote-ref-665)
666. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 497. [↑](#footnote-ref-666)
667. Cf. Tal, *Genesis*, 130-31\*; I. Kalimi, “The Land of Moriah,” *HTR* 83 (1990): 345-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-667)
668. TgNeoph has “Vision” for “Teacher” there. LXX has “high” for both *môreh* and *mōriyyāh*. [↑](#footnote-ref-668)
669. T. Staubli argues that the Canaanites were also used to the idea of redeeming their children not sacrificing them (“Is There an Iconographic Pattern of the Binding Of Isaac?” *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary* 12 [2009]: 111-131). On the view that Gen 22 explains why Israelites are not to sacrifice children, see Levenson, *Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*. [↑](#footnote-ref-669)
670. E. F. Davis, “Self-Consciousness and Conversation,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 1 (1991): 27-40 (32). [↑](#footnote-ref-670)
671. Origen, *Genesis and Exodus*, 137, 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-671)
672. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 18-45*, 418. See Willet’s critique, *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum*, 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-672)
673. Skinner, *Genesis*, 328. [↑](#footnote-ref-673)
674. Zimmerli, *1. Mose 12—25*, 113, summarizing E. Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Berne: Franke, 1946); ET *Mimesis* (reprinted Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003) which has the expression “fraught with background” (12) [↑](#footnote-ref-674)
675. So J. Jacobs, “Willing Obedience with Doubts,” *VT* 60 (2010): 546-59 (552-55). [↑](#footnote-ref-675)
676. Sarna, *Genesis*, 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-676)
677. Blenkinsopp, *Abraham*, 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-677)
678. *GenR* 56:1 has a long list of things that happened “on the third day.” [↑](#footnote-ref-678)
679. Seebass, *Genesis* 2/1:201. [↑](#footnote-ref-679)
680. Ephrem suggests the same reason for his not telling Sarah (“Commentary on Genesis,” 168). [↑](#footnote-ref-680)
681. Cf. von Rad, *Genesis*, 235. [↑](#footnote-ref-681)
682. Cf.Brams’s study in light of game theory, *Biblical Games*, 36-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-682)
683. Fretheim, *Abraham*, 133, 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-683)
684. Ephrem, “Commentary on Genesis,” 168-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-684)
685. Rashi comments that he was prophesying (*Br’šyt*, 233). [↑](#footnote-ref-685)
686. Coats, *Genesis*, 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-686)
687. Calvin, *Genesis* 1:568. [↑](#footnote-ref-687)
688. Seebass *Genesis* 2/1:209. [↑](#footnote-ref-688)
689. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-689)
690. Fretheim, “Genesis,” 496. [↑](#footnote-ref-690)
691. Fretheim, *Abraham*, 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-691)
692. Speiser, *Genesis*, 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-692)
693. See references in *DTT*, 1104-5. LXX has “bound him hand and foot” (cf. Brayford, *Genesis*, 331). [↑](#footnote-ref-693)
694. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-694)
695. So Luther, *Genesis 21—25*, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-695)
696. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-696)
697. See e.g., B. Chilton, “Genesis in Aramaic,” in Evans et al. (eds.). *Book of Genesis*, 495-518; L. Kundert, *Die Opferung/Bindung Isaaks* (2 vols; Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1998). In a sense, then, Isaac was also being tested; though in addition Abraham was martyring his own future (I. Kalimi, “‘Go, I Beg You, Take Your Beloved Son and Slay Him,” *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 13 [2010]: 1-29). [↑](#footnote-ref-697)
698. Arnold, *Genesis*, 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-698)
699. As quoted in S. R. Palmquist and P. M. Rudisill, “Three Perspectives on Abraham's Defense against Kant's Charge of Immoral Conduct,” *Journal of Religion* 89 (2009): 467-97 (470-71). [↑](#footnote-ref-699)
700. Seebass, *Genesis* 2/1:209. [↑](#footnote-ref-700)
701. Luther, *Genesis 21—25*, 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-701)
702. Cf. Calvin, *Genesis* 1:570. [↑](#footnote-ref-702)
703. Attributed to Luther by John Osborne, *Luther*, Act 3, Scene2 (reprinted New York: New American Library, 1963), 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-703)
704. Luther, *Genesis 21—25*, 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-704)
705. Further on the parallels between Gen 21 and Gen 22, see D. W. Lim, “A Study of the Repetition found in Genesis 21:8-21 and 22:1-19,” *Korea Journal of Christian Studies* 25 (2002): 47-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-705)
706. Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*, 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-706)
707. E.g., *City of God* 11:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-707)
708. Luther, *Genesis 21—25*, 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-708)
709. *City of God* 16:32. [↑](#footnote-ref-709)
710. Mays, “Now I Know,” 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-710)
711. Cf. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-711)
712. Qimchi, *Genesis*, on the verse (“*hyr’h hz’t hi’ ’hbh*”). [↑](#footnote-ref-712)
713. KSG. [↑](#footnote-ref-713)
714. Cf. K. Nielsen, “To See and to Be Seen,” *SJOT* 27 (2013): 22-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-714)
715. *Hebrew Questions on Genesis*, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-715)
716. B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (London: SCM, 1992), 334. [↑](#footnote-ref-716)
717. Reno, *Genesis*, 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-717)
718. Luther, *Genesis 21—25*, 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-718)
719. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 46-67*, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-719)
720. Levenson, *Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, 142, alluding to H. C. White, “The Initiation Legend of Isaac,” *ZAW* 91 (1979): 1-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-720)
721. Cf. Levenson’s comments, *Inheriting Abraham*, 85-87. The absence of reference to Isaac is the starting point of Spiegel’s *The Last Trial*. [↑](#footnote-ref-721)
722. Cf. A. Kuruvilla, “The *Akedah* (Genesis 22),” *JETS* 55 (2012): 489-508 (505); A. C. Leder, “Bound to the Altar,” *CTJl* 51 (2016): 283-96 (290). [↑](#footnote-ref-722)
723. P. Trible, “Genesis 22,” in J. P. Rosenblatt and J. C. Sitterson (eds.), *“Not in Heaven”* (Bloomington, IN:Indiana UP, 1991), 170-91 (190). [↑](#footnote-ref-723)
724. See e.g., Kalimi, “‘Go, I Beg You,’” 26-27; and cf. the poems attributed to Ephrem noted by S. P. Brock , “Creating Women’s Voices,” in Grypeou/Spurling (eds.), *Exegetical Encounter*, 125-42. M. Romanska, “Sarah’s Gift,” in R. S. Sabbath (ed.), *Sacred Tropes* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 393-408 reflects on the absence of Sarah from a feminist angle and in light of Jacques Derrida’s *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-724)
725. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-725)
726. Blenkinsopp, *Abraham*, 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-726)
727. *Genesis* 1:557-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-727)
728. Cf. Fretheim, *Abraham*, 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-728)
729. “The Conflict of the Faculties,” in *Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 233-327 (283). In “Three Perspectives on Abraham's Defense against Kant's Charge of Immoral Conduct,” Palmquist and Rudisill provide many references to the expansive literature on Kant and Abraham. [↑](#footnote-ref-729)
730. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 356-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-730)
731. See e.g., M. S. Rindge, “Reconfiguring the Akedah and Recasting God,” *JBL* 130 (2011): 755-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-731)
732. J. de Silentio [Kierkegaard’s pseudonym], *Fear and Trembling* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983). [↑](#footnote-ref-732)
733. A. LaCocoque, “About the ‘Aqedah’ in Genesis 22,” *LTQ* 40 (2005): 191-201 (191), responding to L. H. Kant, "Some Restorative Thoughts on an Agonizing Text," *LTQ* 38 (2003): 77-109, 161-94; see also Kant, “Arguing with God and *Tiqqun Olam*,” *LTQ* 40 (2005): 203-19. Kant suggests that Abraham misunderstood God and failed to argue when he should have done. [↑](#footnote-ref-733)
734. See e.g., T. E. Fretheim, “God, Abraham, and the Abuse of Isaac,” *Word and World* 15 (1995): 49-57; Fretheim, “‘God Was with the Boy,’” in M. J. Bunge et al. (eds.), *The Child in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 3-23 (14-23). [↑](#footnote-ref-734)
735. Fretheim, *Abraham*, 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-735)
736. A. Miller’s treatment of Isaac in her book on childhood trauma, *The Untouched Key* (New York: reprinted Anchor, 1991), 137-45, tellingly starts from paintings of the scene not from the story in Genesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-736)
737. Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 334. [↑](#footnote-ref-737)
738. Cf. Kuruvilla, “The *Akedah* (Genesis 22),” 498. [↑](#footnote-ref-738)
739. Moberly, *Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 92 [↑](#footnote-ref-739)
740. Brichto, *Names of God*, 289-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-740)
741. Levenson, *Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, 141-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-741)
742. Origen, *Genesis*, 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-742)
743. Keil/Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 253. [↑](#footnote-ref-743)
744. See the footnote to 22:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-744)
745. Literally, “the sons of Ḥēt”; only in speaking of Ephron himself in v. 10b does Genesis use the word *Ḥittî*. [↑](#footnote-ref-745)
746. For *lô* (which is almost unparalleled after *lē’mōr*) SP and LXX imply *lō’* “No!” which leads well into the next verse (cf. v. 11, though there, ironically, LXX seems to lack the *lō’*) (cf. Tal, *Genesis*, 134\*). [↑](#footnote-ref-746)
747. Literally, “a leader of God” or “God’s leader” (cf. the usage in 30:8). An Israelite audience might take it more literally: cf. Abraham as God’s friend (Isa 41:8) (von Rad, *Genesis*, 243). LXX has “king.” [↑](#footnote-ref-747)
748. I follow LXX, Vg, Tg in translating the name rather than transliterating it as Makpelah, which is supported by the fact that it has the article. [↑](#footnote-ref-748)
749. The resumptive naming of Ephron suggests the beginning of a new paragraph, following the circumstantial clause in v. 10a. The same applies within v. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-749)
750. Ephron anticipatorily uses the declarative/performative qatal three times, suggesting a speech act, and Abraham follows in v. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-750)
751. V. A. Hurowitz, “*kæsæp 'ober lassoḅer*,” *ZAW* 108 (1996): 12-19, suggests background for this expression. [↑](#footnote-ref-751)
752. The verb *qûm*, literally “arose”; so also in v. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-752)
753. Calvin, *Genesis* 1:575. [↑](#footnote-ref-753)
754. Cf. Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 239. [↑](#footnote-ref-754)
755. Cf. Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-755)
756. Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 241. [↑](#footnote-ref-756)
757. TgNeoph calls it “the town of the four ancestors,” Adam, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (*GenR* 58:4 suggests further identifications). [↑](#footnote-ref-757)
758. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-758)
759. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 270. [↑](#footnote-ref-759)
760. Zimmerli, *1. Mose 12—25*, 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-760)
761. Cf. Luther, *Genesis 21—25*, 189-92, 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-761)
762. And cf. 22:17, just before (Brett, *Genesis*, 79). [↑](#footnote-ref-762)
763. Blenkinsopp, *Abraham*, 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-763)
764. De La Torre, *Genesis*, 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-764)
765. Cf. Skinner, *Genesis*, 337. [↑](#footnote-ref-765)
766. Cf. Dillmann, *Genesis* 2:154. [↑](#footnote-ref-766)
767. KSG [↑](#footnote-ref-767)
768. See S. C. Russell, “Abraham’s Purchase of Ephron’s Land in Anthropological Perspective,” *BibInt* 21 (2013): 153-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-768)
769. Cf. De La Torre, *Genesis*, 224-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-769)
770. See N. MacDonald, “Driving a Hard Bargain,” in L. L. Lawrence and M. I. Aguilar (eds.), *Anthropology and Biblical Studies* Leiden: Deo, 2004), 79-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-770)
771. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-771)
772. So Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-772)
773. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-773)
774. Cf. Alter, *Genesis*, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-774)
775. Reno, *Genesis*, 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-775)
776. Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*, 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-776)
777. See Cohn, “Negotiating with the Natives.” [↑](#footnote-ref-777)
778. Seebass, *Genesis* 2/2:235. [↑](#footnote-ref-778)
779. The infinitive precedes the finite verb for emphasis: more literally, “taking back should I take back?” [↑](#footnote-ref-779)
780. Literally, “had known.” [↑](#footnote-ref-780)
781. LXX, Tg have “brother,” assimilating to v. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-781)
782. The repeat of Rebekah’s name suggests that a new paragraph begins here. [↑](#footnote-ref-782)
783. One would initially take the servant to be the subject of “unharnessed” and “gave,” but it was not he who gave the water. One might then take the subject of these two verbs as impersonal, “someone.” But the subject of the subsequent “he said” has to be Laban, and it is simplest to take Laban as also the subject of “unharnessed” and “gave,” which fits with his demonstrativeness in word and action in vv. 29-31. LXX, SP have “they said” for the final verb, an easier reading. [↑](#footnote-ref-783)
784. K implies qal passive *wayyîśem* (cf. 50:26; GK 53u; 73f); Q has hophal *wayyûśam* (Tal, *Genesis*, 138\*). [↑](#footnote-ref-784)
785. LXX, SP have “his.” [↑](#footnote-ref-785)
786. In the broad sense of “relative.” [↑](#footnote-ref-786)
787. Literally, “Answered [singular] Laban and Betu’el, and said [plural].” For singular verb followed by plural subject, cf. v. 55; v. 61 is even closer as it has singular verb followed by plural verb. [↑](#footnote-ref-787)
788. S. Bar suggests that *migdānōt* are specifically fruit (“What Did the Servant Give to Rebecca’s Brother and Mother?” *Biblical* 94 [2013]: 565-72). [↑](#footnote-ref-788)
789. Literally, “for days or ten.” The expression is unclear. TgOnq, for instance, has “a year, or [at least] ten months.” [↑](#footnote-ref-789)
790. “The Masoretic vocalization doesn’t make much sense” (Tal, *Genesis*, 139\*); the expression is tortuous. The words *bā’ mibbô’ bᵉ’ēr* look as if they may reflect some dittography, but neither the versions nor modern scholarship suggests a consensus on what might have been a more original text. [↑](#footnote-ref-790)
791. I follow LXX, Vg, and Tg in linking the hapax *śûaḥ* with *śîaḥ* I, which can mean talk or reflect, esp. reflect out loud (see *HALOT*, 1319-20). Other possibilities are that he was out for a walk (cf. v. 65; see *HALOT*, 1312), or that he was gardening (cf. *śîaḥ* II; see Z. Ron, “Isaac’s Personality,” *JBQ* 43 [2015]: 29-34). [↑](#footnote-ref-791)
792. On the use of *nāpal*, see the footnote to 14:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-792)
793. “Into the tent” (*hā’ōhĕlāh*) has the article (and then -*āh* indicating destination), so it is not construct; the genitive is periphrastic (see GK 127f, which takes the bracketed phrase as a gloss). [↑](#footnote-ref-793)
794. Cf. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-794)
795. E.g., Gunkel, *Genesis*, 246. [↑](#footnote-ref-795)
796. Cf. e.g., Zimmerli, *1. Mose 12—25*, 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-796)
797. A. Olrick, “Epic Laws of Folk Narratve,” in Dundes (ed.), *Study of Folklore*, 129-41 (132-34). [↑](#footnote-ref-797)
798. See Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 88-113; Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 365-440. [↑](#footnote-ref-798)
799. See Barth, *CD* III, 3:3-4; Barth goes on to note (35) that this providence is however operating in connection with God pursuing his covenantal purpose. [↑](#footnote-ref-799)
800. See Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 137, 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-800)
801. Against e.g., Luther, *Genesis 21—25*, 218-99: Luther is especially concerned about clandestine betrothals and betrothal without parental approval. [↑](#footnote-ref-801)
802. See Cohn, “Negotiating with the Natives.” [↑](#footnote-ref-802)
803. Contrast De La Torre, *Genesis*, 227-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-803)
804. Blenkinsopp, *Abraham*, 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-804)
805. Cf. L. M. Teugels, *Bible and Midrash* (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-805)
806. Cf. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 53; Alter notes that in this story and elsewhere Isaac contrasts with the hustling and bustling Rebekah. [↑](#footnote-ref-806)
807. Cf. J. M. Sasson, “The Servant’s Tale,” *JNES* 65 (2006): 241-65 (243-48). [↑](#footnote-ref-807)
808. Zimmerli, *Mose 12—25*, 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-808)
809. So e.g., TgPsJ; contrast Dillmann, *Genesis* 2:160. [↑](#footnote-ref-809)
810. Zimmerli, *Mose 12—25*, 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-810)
811. So e.g., TgPsJ. [↑](#footnote-ref-811)
812. Cf. Arnold, *Genesis*, 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-812)
813. Cf. Cohn, “Negotiating (with) the Natives.” [↑](#footnote-ref-813)
814. Cf. Sasson, “The Servant’s Tale,” 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-814)
815. Cf. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-815)
816. Luther, *Genesis 21—25*, 253. [↑](#footnote-ref-816)
817. Cf. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-817)
818. See G. A. Rendsburg, “Some False Leads in the Identification of Late Biblical Texts,” *JBL* 121 (2002): 23-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-818)
819. Cf, Fretheim, “Genesis,” 510. [↑](#footnote-ref-819)
820. Cf. BDB, 74b. But *naharayim* may be only a quasi-dual (cf. GK 88c), equivalent to *Naḫrima* in the Amarna Letters (cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, 143). [↑](#footnote-ref-820)
821. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-821)
822. See the comment on 19:19. [↑](#footnote-ref-822)
823. Cf. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-823)
824. Cf. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-824)
825. On the characterization of Rebekah, see S. Gillmayr-Bucher, “The Woman of Their Dreams,” in Davies/Clines (eds.), *World of Genesis*, 90-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-825)
826. Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-826)
827. Teugels, *Bible and Midrash*, 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-827)
828. D. Penchansky notes the comparison and contrast between the use of this verb in Gen 24 and Gen 19 (“Staying the Night,” in Nolan Fewell [ed.], *Reading between Texts*, 77-88). [↑](#footnote-ref-828)
829. Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*, 239. [↑](#footnote-ref-829)
830. But what of Gen 29:12, *GenR* asks, and answers that her mother was dead. [↑](#footnote-ref-830)
831. See Teugels, *Bible and Midrash*, 114-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-831)
832. Cf. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-832)
833. See E. J. van Wolde, “Telling and Retelling,” in J. C. de Moor (ed.), *Synchronic or Diachronic?* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 227–44; Teugels, *Bible and Midrash*, 69-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-833)
834. It’s hard to make a distinction between these two Hebrew words (cf. Hamilton, *Genesis 18—50*, 146-47); neither specifically denotes a virgin. [↑](#footnote-ref-834)
835. Cf. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 148: he calls it moral blackmail. [↑](#footnote-ref-835)
836. Cf. Keil/Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 260. [↑](#footnote-ref-836)
837. See further the comment on 34:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-837)
838. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-838)
839. Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 262, [↑](#footnote-ref-839)
840. De La Torre, *Genesis*, 231. [↑](#footnote-ref-840)
841. Cf. G. Vall, “What Was Isaac Doing in the Field?” *VT* 44 (1994): 513-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-841)
842. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 161, who notes that symbolically, v. 34 is the chapter’s middle verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-842)
843. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-843)
844. Cf. Brayford, *Genesis*, 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-844)
845. On the word order, see the footnote to 4:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-845)
846. Literally, “these are the days.” [↑](#footnote-ref-846)
847. The subject follows the second verb, suggesting that “expired and died” is a kind of hendiadys (cf. v. 17, also 35:29—however, there the subject comes in between the two verbs), though *IBHS* 32.3b, 39.2.5 only uses the term “hendiadys” to refer to verbs linked with conjunctive *waw*. [↑](#footnote-ref-847)
848. SP, LXX, Vg have “full of days,” assimilating to passages such as 35:29. [↑](#footnote-ref-848)
849. Cf. Luther, *Genesis 21—25*, 300, 301, quoting from Jerome, *Hebrew Questions on Genesis* 59. The assumption that a man marries chiefly for sex evidently antedates the modern period; Jerome and Luther refer to a traditional way to solve the “problem,” by seeing Qeturah as another name for Hagar (see e.g., Rashi, *Br’šyt*, 266). [↑](#footnote-ref-849)
850. Brett, *Genesis*, 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-850)
851. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 400. [↑](#footnote-ref-851)
852. See Montgomery, *Arabia and the Bible*, 37-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-852)
853. Cf. Origen, *Genesis and Exodus*, 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-853)
854. De La Torre, *Genesis*, 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-854)
855. Cf. Speiser, *Genesis*, 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-855)
856. Cf. Calvin, *Genesis*, 2:35. [↑](#footnote-ref-856)
857. So De La Torre, *Genesis*, 234. [↑](#footnote-ref-857)
858. Cf. Kaminsky’s comments, *Yet I Loved Jacob*, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-858)
859. Kidner, *Genesis*, 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-859)
860. Qimchi, *Genesis*, on the verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-860)
861. Calvin, *Genesis*, 2:37. [↑](#footnote-ref-861)
862. Cf. Ibn Ezra, *Genesis*, 246. [↑](#footnote-ref-862)
863. Westermann, *Genesis 12—36*, 397. [↑](#footnote-ref-863)
864. Cf. Origen, *Genesis and Exodus*, 172-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-864)
865. Reno, *Genesis*, 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-865)
866. Cf. Mbuvi, *Belonging in Genesis*, 144; E. E. Kozlova, “Abraham’s Burial,” *JSOT* 42 (2017): 177-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-866)
867. Zimmerli, *1. Mose 12—25*, 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-867)