

## **Commentary on Genesis (8).**

**Abraham Pleads for Sodom and Gomorrah - the Destruction (Genesis 18.1-19.38).**

**18.1 'And Yahweh appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre as he sat in the tent door on the heat of the day'.**

**Reference to Abraham as 'him', applied from the last chapter, shows that the covenant accounts have not been inter-connected without thought. It is clear that the site at the oaks of Mamre was the permanent site from which the tribe still operated (compare 13.18).**

**'He sat in the tent door at the heat of the day'. He was probably enjoying his siesta under some kind of cover and this was why he spotted the strangers. There is a deliberate contrast between Abraham who sits in the door of his tent, and Lot who sits in the gate of Sodom (19.1), bringing out the choices the two men have made.**

**'Yahweh appeared to him'. It may be that at first he did not realise that the three men he saw coming included Yahweh in human form, perhaps the 'angel of Yahweh', so the writer lets us know Who it was Who was coming. But the narrative does not tell us when the fact dawned on Abraham. It could however be that it is intended to be indicated by the switch from the impersonal 'they said' to 'he said'. That certainly drew attention to the fact that the leader of the three was someone special from Yahweh. Or it could have been when God reveals to him His plans concerning Sodom and Gomorrah. Whatever be the case the reader knows immediately.**

**The final purpose of their arrival is to bring judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah for their evil ways. This emphasises that Yahweh is 'the Judge of all the earth' (18.25), not just of the tribe. The other two were angels who came as witnesses to demonstrate that the cities were being given a fair chance (18.21-22; 19.1 on).**

**But the main purpose of the coming of Yahweh Himself is the confirmation of the covenant in respect of a son by Sarah, and, as we learn later, to give Abraham opportunity to intercede on behalf of any righteous people in the guilty cities. It is this renewal of the covenant and the promise Abraham received about the cities which makes the writing down of the narrative necessary. The first is the treasured promise of a natural heir. The One Who can destroy Sodom and Gomorrah can surely produce an heir. The second is a record of Yahweh's covenant with Abraham which will result in the deliverance of his nephew, Lot.**

**The fact that Yahweh comes to inform Abraham of what He is about to do, and that He allows him to be an intercessor (one who goes between) emphasises Abraham's unique position in God's sight. As the beginning of the new people of God he is introduced to God's secrets, and given his first opportunity to influence wider events through intercession.**

**18.2 'And he lifted up his eyes and looked, and lo, three men stood over against him, and when he saw them he ran to meet them from the tent door and bowed himself to the earth.'**

**Yahweh is accompanied by two others who, we learn later, are messengers of God (angels = messengers). 'Three men'. We are intended to recognise that at this point Abraham does not know who they are. But he does recognise that their coming is important. They travel at the heat of the day and there was something about them that merited the direct attention of Abraham (verse 1).**

**It is probable that his men had alerted Abram to the presence of strangers, but of such an**

**important kind that they merited Abram's personal interest.**

**'Stood over against him'. There is an element of surprise here. He is made suddenly aware of them. This is partly already explained by the time of day. He has been dozing in the heat under his tent flap. But we, who have been told who they are, are probably intended to see here an element of the supernatural.**

**There is also here a deliberate contrast with Sodom. Abraham himself welcomes the men on behalf of the tribe, eagerly and rapturously and with all honour, and provides full hospitality. That he advances himself suggests that he saw them as important men.**

**'Bowed himself to the earth', a traditional way of showing deep respect (compare 19.1; 33.3; 48.12). Hospitality was an important Eastern custom. Abraham does all that is right.**

**18.3-5 'And he said, "My lord, if now I have found favour in your sight, pass not away I beg you from your servant. Let now a little water be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and you can comfort your heart, after that you shall pass on; because you have come to your servant".'**

**Abraham addresses one of them, who clearly stands out from the others as their superior, with full Eastern courtesy. In contrast with Sodom his thought is only for the visitors' welfare.**

**'My lord'. A customary way of greeting. 'A little water --- a morsel of bread'. What is being offered is understated with true humility. It is a typical Eastern understatement. He intends to give them the best.**

**'Rest under a tree'. In contrast with Sodom they are quite safe from molestation here. His total concern is for their welfare.**

**'Wash your feet'. The washing of feet was a recognised luxury for the weary traveller whose feet were dirty and sand ridden, and probably very sweaty even in their sandals.**

**18.5b ' And they said, "So do as you have said".'**

**His offer is accepted in the spirit in which it is given. Their assurance here contrasts with the certainty they have in Sodom of mistreatment. But the brief reply, in contrast with Abraham's effusiveness, brings out the supreme authority of the party. They represent themselves as superiors dealing with an inferior.**

**18.6-8 'And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it and make cakes." And Abraham ran to the herd and fetched a good and tender calf and gave it to a servant, and he quickly dressed it. And he took butter and milk and the calf which he had dressed and set it before them, and he stood by them under the tree and they ate.'**

**That Abraham took charge of the proceedings demonstrates both his hospitality and the importance he placed on the guests. Again there is the contrast with the treatment the two angels would receive in Sodom.**

**'Three measures of fine meal', that is, 'plenty'. 'Two' would be 'a little' compare 'two sticks' - 1 Kings 17.12 - three is plenty. Abraham would not expect to give detailed catering instructions to his experienced wife.**

**It is Abraham himself who takes charge of the man's side of things, the selecting and**

butchering of the calf, although the latter is fitly done by a servant. We note that Abraham's humble 'morsel of bread' has in fact become a feast.

'They ate'. There is no pretence here. It is our inadequacy that makes us seek to 'defend' God's otherness. God can do whatever He wants. In fact the eating is important. It demonstrates that the arrival of these clearly important men is with peaceful intent, for they accept Abraham's hospitality. Not to have eaten would have indicated otherwise. It is possibly also intended to bring out Abraham's unique relationship with Yahweh (contrast Judges 13.16).

18.9 'And they said to him, "Where is Sarah, your wife?" And he said, "Why, in the tent."

The question is still from the impersonal 'they'. Abraham knows they are important but is not yet aware of the One with Whom he is dealing.

18.10a 'And he said, "I will certainly return to you when the season comes round (or when the spring comes), and lo, Sarah your wife will have a son".'

This is the moment when the leader of the three reveals Himself as a special messenger of Yahweh. The 'they' becomes 'he', and the promise of a son through Sarah is renewed. ('When the season comes round' may mean 'when the conception matures into birth', indicating that the child is already conceived).

18.10b-11 'And Sarah overheard in the tent door which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, and well aged. It had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.'

Sarah was possibly hidden behind the tent door listening in to what was said, or alternatively is standing in the tent door, visible but discreet, ready to watch over any further needs of the visitors. The writer then makes clear that nature had caught up with Sarah. Her periods had ceased. The birth of a son was seemingly impossible.

18.12 'And Sarah laughed within herself, saying, "When I have grown old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?''

The words she overhears make Sarah laugh to herself. The idea is preposterous. The pleasure refers to the pleasure of birth, the joy when a child comes into the world (compare Psalm 113.9; John 16.21). Her laugh is a mark of unbelief. The promises previously given have been quite clear (17.19, 21).

It is probable that Sarah is not yet aware of who the visitor is. But her expression may have been enough to give away her amusement. There is a poignancy in her words. The word for 'grown old' means 'worn out'. She is beyond usefulness. But with God no one is ever 'too old' to be used.

18.13-14 'And Yahweh said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh saying 'will I really bear a child, when I am old?' Is anything too hard for Yahweh? At the set time I will return to you when the season comes round, and Sarah will have a son".'

Nothing is hidden from God. The laugh, and the thought of the heart, is discerned. And it is answered. 'Is anything too hard for Yahweh?' Yahweh can do anything. The universality of this statement at this time is remarkable. Yahweh is seen as supreme and all powerful.

'At the set time' compare 17.21. This passage assumes the existence of the covenant in chapter 17.

So the promise is sure. Sarah *will* have a son. The partly direct, partly indirect method of first referring to Yahweh and then speaking in the first person is reminiscent of the angel of Yahweh (compare 16.10-11). But Abraham is too important in God's eyes for His approach to be described as anything but direct. Thus we have 'Yahweh said'.

18.15a 'And Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh", for she was afraid.'

Her fear arises from the fact that the man knows her thoughts, and that what she had done was a breach of etiquette. It is stressed by the fact that she interrupts the men in conversation, another breach of etiquette, for she is not sitting with them. But she is becoming aware that the One Who is speaking has the power so to speak and the power to punish. She tries to cover up her failure. She has laughed at the representative of Yahweh. But she cannot deceive God, nor can we.

18.15b 'And he said, "Oh no. But you did laugh".'

The words appear a little harsh. But God wants her to know that nothing is hidden from Him. And He wants her to face up to her unbelief. It will be better for her if she does. Sometimes God has to be cruel to be kind.

18.16a 'And the men rose up from there and looked towards Sodom.'

Knowing the final result our hearts chill at the words. But the incident is perfectly innocent to Abraham. It simply means that that was the direction in which it was clear they were going.

18.16b 'And Abraham went with them to bring them on their way.'

He is the perfect host to the end. He had no other purpose. But how important it was for Lot that he should do so. On such a small courtesy can depend lives.

18.17 'And Yahweh said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what am doing? Seeing that Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him. For I have known him to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of Yahweh, to do righteousness and justice. To the end that Yahweh may bring on Abraham what he has said concerning him." '

This is probably the time at which Abraham becomes aware that this is not just a messenger of Yahweh, but Yahweh Himself.

Nothing could more reveal the importance of Abraham in the purposes of God than this stated intention of Yahweh. Abraham is so involved in God's plan for the future of the world that he is deserving of knowing what God will do. God has, as it were, taken Abraham into partnership, albeit as a very junior partner. God does not hide His secrets from His prophets (Amos 3.7), and as chapter 15 has made clear, Abram is a prophet.

The particular covenant of chapter 12, rather than the wider covenant of chapter 17, is in mind here as befits the previous mention of the special heir. This is a codicil to 18.14. It confirms that a great and mighty nation will arise from Abraham through Isaac, and that all the nations of the world will be blessed through Abraham, and his seed, through the chosen line. This latter promise is significantly only stated elsewhere in 12.3, which is pre-Ishmael, 22.18 where it is directly related to the incident with Isaac, and 26.4 where it is promised to Isaac. It is thus never directly related to the wider covenant of chapter 17.

The covenants are clearly distinguished. This particular blessing is to come through the seed of

**Isaac, not of Ishmael. Thus, while Ishmael is to be blessed as Abraham's seed, God's purpose for the world will be achieved through Isaac's seed.**

**Incidentally this brings out how ancient the covenant in chapter 17 is. Such promises would never have been conceded by later Israel.**

**'For I have known him ---'. The word to 'know' means more than just intellectual knowledge. It is constantly used of personal relations between a man and a woman (Genesis 4.1 and often) and here it signifies that Yahweh has entered into a special relationship with Abraham. He has chosen him and set him apart in His purposes.**

**His purpose in setting Abraham apart is also stated. It is that he might so teach and order his family and family tribe to keep the way of Yahweh that they 'do righteousness and justice'. It is this that will bring about the final blessing. Thus morality and ethics is set at the heart of the covenant with Abraham. But it is a morality set in what Yahweh Himself is, for it is 'the way of Yahweh'. It is their personal response to Him and what He is that will bring the blessing to the whole world.**

**To 'do righteousness' is to follow the covenant completely, to 'do justice' is to deal with all failures to observe the covenant requirements. But the context of God's judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah brings out that these requirements are ethical and are demanded of all not just those in the covenant. The covenant stipulations are merely a mirror of what God requires from the world.**

**Now Yahweh reveals His full purpose to Abraham.**

**18.20 'And Yahweh said, "Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great and because their sin is very grievous I will now go down and see whether they have totally done according to its cry (ze'aqa) which has come to me, and if not I will know".'**

**The cry of those who have suffered in Sodom and Gomorrah, like the cry of Abel's blood (4.10), has reached God. It is the cry of the land itself as it swallowed up their blood and has witnessed extreme sin beyond the imagination of men ('its cry'). As the next chapter makes clear no stranger was safe in their streets, no woman could preserve her virtue. They had become utterly bestial. The Hebrew word for this 'cry' is ze'aqa which is a semi-technical legal term referring to a strong cry for justice. Compare its use in Habbakuk 1.2; Job 19.7.**

**We have learned earlier that the iniquity of the Amorite was not yet full (15.16). It is clear, however, that the iniquity of the men of Sodom is, such were their evil ways.**

**This is specific anthropomorphism. God is of course aware of the truth. That is why He has come. But He wants Abraham to be aware of what is about to happen before it happens. Thus will he be able to intercede in such a way as to deliver his nephew and any other righteous men and thus will he and his people learn the lesson that will result from the appalling event to come. It is for Abraham's sake that the delay has taken place.**

**But God also wants Abraham to know that He gave Sodom and Gomorrah every chance. He is concerned for Abraham to know the full truth about the situation so that he will be satisfied that Yahweh has done what is right.**

**In a sense this is a microcosm of the great Day of Judgment. Again God will already know everything, but the Day is necessary so as to confirm to all beings that God has dealt justly.**

**'I will now go down'. This echoes 11.7. It is His angels who go in person as witnesses to the evil**

of the cities. But the all-seeing eye of Yahweh will go with them, 'going down' to see the situation after He has left Abraham and returned above.

**18.22 'And the men turned from that place and went towards Sodom, but Abraham yet stood before Yahweh.'**

The repetition of their advance on Sodom (compare verse 16), now more specific, represents their inexorable approach to its judgment. It is intended to intensify the drama.

It is a sign of Abraham's worth that he is concerned for his neighbours, and willing even to risk the displeasure of Yahweh in order to help them. Even while they go towards Sodom, Abraham pleads for Sodom as he stands on the mountainside looking down on the cities of the Plain before him (19.27-28). For as he looks down on the doomed cities, how can he fail to be stirred?

**18.23-25 'And Abraham drew near and said, "Will you consume the righteous with the wicked? It may be that there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you consume, and not spare the place for the fifty righteous that are in it? Far be it from you to behave in this way, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous will be as the wicked. Be that far from you. Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?"'**

Although unaware of it the one who is being tested here is Abraham. Will he be concerned for his neighbours who are outside the covenant? But Abraham reveals that he has the right instinct and an understanding of God's character. He knows that God is merciful and will not be unfair in His behaviour towards men. Thus he makes this the basis of his plea. Can a righteous God destroy fifty righteous men in order to bring His judgment on the remainder? Never, says Abraham, it is impossible. Surely He Who is the judge of all the earth must do what is right. Only the guilty must suffer. The righteous cannot be treated in the same way as the wicked.

In view of the belief of the day in the solidarity of communities, so that they were seen as one in guilt or innocence, Abraham's view is refreshing. He separates the individual from the community. (Compare Ezekiel 18.20 etc). He believes that in the end every man is responsible singly before God.

It is telling that Abraham nowhere tries to plead that Sodom as a whole is not worthy of the punishment they are to receive. He is too well aware of what goes on there. But he cannot believe that there are not some who deserve mercy, and he hopes, in achieving mercy for them, to achieve mercy for all..

It is significant that Abraham sees Yahweh as judge of all the earth. To him there is but one God Who is over all. But equally significant is his confidence in the ethical nature of God. He knows God must do what is right, that He is unfailingly a righteous God. It is to his credit that his concern is not just for Lot. His concern is for Sodom as a whole. (The gods of the nations could not have been appealed to like this. Their standards were similar to men's and their portrayed behaviour often worse).

**18.26 'And Yahweh said, "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city then will I spare all for their sake.'**

Yahweh confirms Abraham's faith in His justice. If there are fifty righteous within the city all will be spared lest the fifty righteous be thought to be unfairly dealt with.

**18.27-28a 'And Abraham answered and said, "See now, I have taken on me to speak to the**

**Lord, who am but dust and ashes. It may be that there will lack five of the fifty righteous. Will you destroy all the city for lack of five?"**

**Abraham is aware of his temerity in speaking up and abases himself to Yahweh. For 'dust and ashes', a token of unfitness and unworthiness, compare Job 30.19. But it is noticeable that here he refers to Yahweh as 'the Lord'. He is Lord of Creation, Lord of Egypt, Lord of Sodom, Lord of Abraham, Lord and Judge of all. Who then is he, Abraham, to dare to question him? There is nothing brazen about Abraham's response. He recognises with Whom he deals. The title used emphasises this. It suggests the approach of a suppliant to one who judges. Abraham is not approaching Him as Yahweh the covenant God, for Sodom is not within the covenant, but as 'the Lord', the One Who is over all.**

**18.28b 'And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find there forty five".'**

**Again Yahweh accepts the principle. If there are any grounds for mercy He will show it.**

**18.29-32 'And he spoke to him yet again and said, "It may be that forty will be found there."**

**And he said, "I will not do it for forty's sake." And he said, "Oh, let not the Lord be angry and I will speak. It may be that there will be thirty found there." And he said "I will not do it if I find thirty there." And he said, "See, I have taken it on myself to speak to the Lord. It may be that there will be twenty found there." And he said, "I will not do it for the twenty's sake." And he said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak yet but this once. It may be that ten will be found there." And he said, "I will not destroy it for the ten's sake."**

**Each request of Abraham, torn in his heart as he looks down on Sodom and considers its fate, receives a similar response, until even Abraham is satisfied. He dare go no further. Surely there must be ten there? If not they can deserve no mercy. Some have questioned stopping at ten. But ten represents at the most two families. If there is only one family that is not unrighteous, and that composed of sojourners, (and Abraham is aware of that one family), he knows there can be no plea. Sodom deserves its fate.**

**The whole passage is important. It emphasises God's justice in dealing with Sodom as He does. God does not want to destroy but He has no alternative. Abraham's very plea finally demonstrates that it has gone beyond the possibility of redemption. One day God will have to make the same decision about the world. At present God deals with the world on the same basis, sparing the many for the sake of the few. But one day He will call time. Then He will take out the few and His judgment will come.**

**But Abraham's request is satisfied in one way. While the Lord will not spare the city he will save 'the righteous'. The next passage reveals this in the deliverance of Lot. Yet Lot is only righteous in that he has not gone beyond the borders of acceptability. He has sat in the gate of Sodom, sharing its environment and even possibly its rule as a city elder. He has condoned the behaviour of the people of Sodom by his silence. He has remained among them in spite of their behaviour, not in order to evangelise them but in order to share their wealth.**

**Would then the Lord have destroyed Lot with the city had it not been for Abraham? The question requires no answer. Yahweh knows that His servant Abraham will not fail the test (the test is for Abraham's sake). He has thus purposed to save Lot, undeserving though he is. The question is not the deliverance of Lot but the destiny of Sodom.**

**18.33 'And Yahweh went his way as soon as he had left communing with Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place.'**

**Yahweh does not go down to Sodom. When Yahweh, or the angel of Yahweh, leaves the presence of men, where He goes is never described. He passes into the unseen world. What a remarkable picture this gives us of Abraham's position before Yahweh. Yahweh had been here to commune personally with Abraham. Sodom is left to his angels.**

**'And Abraham returned to his place.' His place is in the land where God has placed him. He has no desire to be in Sodom. And he is satisfied that he has done all that he can for Sodom, and that God will do what is right. Now he can only wait and see.**

**19.1 'And the two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot sat in the gate of Sodom. And Lot saw them and rose to meet them, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth.'**

**Compare 18.1-2. What a contrast. Abraham sat in the door of his tent, a place of thought and meditation and repose. Lot sits in the gate of Sodom, a place of evil thoughts, sensuousness and perverted activity. Abraham runs to meet his guests. Lot merely stands up for them, although both bow themselves to the ground in welcome. While Lot is not to be faulted he is shown as lacking the effusiveness of Abraham. This is surely not accidental. It is intended to bring out their differing attitudes of heart towards God which is brought out in their attitude to distinguished strangers.**

**Sitting in the gate of the city suggests Lot was involved with the 'elders' who helped to rule Sodom (compare Ruth 4.1-2). He would have obtained much reflected credit from Abraham's activity in chapter 14. He is now well settled in Sodom and had put down his roots, regardless of the behaviour of its inhabitants. After all it was 'business'. By many that is taken as excusing anything.**

**The gate of the city is probably a tower gate, possibly with two gates (compare 2 Samuel 18 24) so that there is a space between the gates, protecting the way in. During the day it would be used for business and as a courtroom for the trial in public of local offenders. In the evening men would gather there, especially the elders of the city.**

**His concern for them constrains him to welcome the new arrivals. He even hopes to save them from the fate worse than death that he knew might await them.**

**Some point to the speed of the men's passage. In the middle of the day they are at the oaks of Mamre. By evening they are at the gates of Sodom, forty miles away along a difficult road. But it may not be the same day. They may well have travelled through the night and even the following night. The mention of evening is to bring out that they will spend the night there rather than to stress the time. However, it is true that angels are not constrained like others.**

**19.2a 'And he said, "Behold now my lords, turn aside I beg you into your servant's house, and stay all night, and wash your feet, and you shall rise early and go on your way".'**

**This again compares with Abraham's welcome. Much the same hospitality, but in what different circumstances. Unlike Abraham he dare not leave them outside.**

**'My lords' contrasts with 'my lord' (18.3). Lot only has angels to address. He is not 'the friend of Yahweh' (compare James 2.23).**

**19.2b 'And they said, "No but we will abide in the street all night".'**

**The men are making clear that they had not come specifically to see Lot. They were there to check out the city. Again this is in contrast to the personal approach to Abraham. The test is to be a genuine one. Sodom is being given a chance, even though a slight one.**



Perhaps they were also testing out Lot, for Lot knew what a dangerous place the street in Sodom was for strangers. It is to his credit that he would not be restrained. There is still much good in him. This is in deliberate contrast to the men of the city. He does not realise that he is passing God's test and proving himself the only one who is 'righteous'.

**19.3 'And he urged them strongly, and they turned in to him and entered into his house, and he made them a feast and baked unleavened bread and they ate.'**

It is in Lot's favour that he persists in his attempts to help them, even though he does not know who they are. The constant parallels with chapter 18 demonstrate the unity of the whole passage.

**'Baked unleavened bread'. Lot does all that is right but lacks the effusiveness of Abraham.**

**19.4-5 'But, before they lay down, the men of the city, even the men of Sodom, surrounded the house, both young and old, all the people from every section. And they called to Lot and said to him, "Where are the men who came to you this night? Bring them out to us that we might know them."'**

The enthusiasm for evil that epitomises Sodom is brought out here. 'Before they lay down'. They did not even wait for full darkness. It is then stressed that they had all gathered for the sport. They intended to take the men and practise their sexual perversions on them as both participants and spectators. There was no limit to their evil.

How many innocent strangers in the past had suffered in this way, including children? We will never know. But, in the light of this, who can doubt that God's way was right? These people had no redeeming feature.

**'The men of the city, even the men of Sodom'. The repetition brings out the emphasis on who these men are. They represent the whole city, and they are Sodomites.**

(In later times to be compared with Sodom was to have reached the lowest level of behaviour. But the idea even then is not that such people commit the sins of Sodom. The prophets had in mind the sins of their own times and possibly could not even conceive the total perversion of the Sodomites - see Isaiah 1.10; 3.9; Jeremiah 23.14; Ezekiel 16.49).

**19.6 'And Lot went to the door and went out to them, and he shut the door behind him.'**

Lot is no coward. He goes to meet the thirsting crowd. The picture is vivid. His slow approach to the door. Then slipping through a gap in the door and quickly pulling it to behind him. Then facing the crowd, many of whom he will know.

**19.7 'And he said, "I beg you, my fellow-citizens, do not behave so wickedly".'**

It is no easy task to face such a baying crowd. Lot was unquestionably a brave man. But he has given hospitality to the strangers (and deliberately) and custom meant it was his responsibility to protect them. The laws of hospitality were strongly ingrained, but it is further evidence of the evil of the men of Sodom that they ignored them completely. They had no saving virtue. But Lot was determined to do his best to save the men. He knows he cannot appeal to their consciences and succeed so he falls back on desperate devices.

**19.8 "See now, I have two daughters who have never been to bed with a man. Let me, I beg you, bring them out to you, and do to them what seems good in your eyes, only do nothing to these men, inasmuch as they have come under the shadow of my roof".'**

**It could well be that he does not intend to let them have his daughters (he has not brought them out with him). It may be he is giving them occasion to face up to their atrocious behaviour, and is giving them pause for thought. He perhaps hopes they will dismiss such an idea as unacceptable and thus cool down.**

**But whatever is the situation there, he is stressing the laws of hospitality. He is pointing out vividly that he has taken the men under his protection and has a sacred duty therefore to protect them, as the men of Sodom know well. Under the laws of hospitality he has an even greater duty to them than to his daughters. He is desperately using every method to stem the wave of bestial feeling that has gripped the town. Lot has no illusions about his fellow-citizens but he is doing what he can. Yet if you live among, and compromise with, totally evil people, but do not become totally evil yourself, you can be sure that one day they will turn against you. And so it proved.**

**19.9 'And they said, "Stand back". And they said, "This one fellow came in to sojourn and he must now be a judge over us. Now we will deal worse with you than with them."'**

**Some simply tell him to get out of the way, but others begin to bring up the racial factor, and then the moral factor. Lot is not really one of us, they say. He just lives among us. (The previous day they may well have thought differently, but such are men hot after sin). Now he is setting up his standards against ours. This foreigner is setting himself up as our judge. It is interesting to note how even evil men try to persuade their consciences that what they are doing is right. This is their way, they say, and who has the right to criticise?**

**"Now we will deal worse with you than with them." His reputation among them is now in tatters. No longer a fellow-citizen but an alien, and therefore a fair target for their evil ways. They will abuse him first, then they will turn to the others.**

**19.9 'And they pressed sore on the man, even Lot, and drew near to break down the door.'**

**The writer has a fine touch. 'The man'. No longer 'Lot' to them, only to the reader. He is now a stranger. Previously they have held back slightly in deference to their fellow-citizen, but now they are unrestrained, for he is no longer that. Lot is about to be sexually assaulted and worse.**

**19.10 'But the men reached out their hand and brought Lot into the house to them, and shut to the door.'**

**The door opens sufficiently for Lot to be dragged in to safety by the men within. Through them the hands of Yahweh reach out to protect him.**

**19.11 'And they smote the men who were at the door of the house with blindness, both small and great, so that they wearied themselves to find the door.'**

**Perhaps it was a temporary blindness brought on by an exceedingly bright light. We do not know. (The Hebrew word does not indicate permanent blindness but a problem with the sight. Compare 2 Kings 6.18-20). But it was sufficient to deter their efforts, and, it seems, to persuade them eventually to leave the vicinity, at least for the time being.**

**19.12-13 'And the men said to Lot, "Have you any other relatives? Son-in-law, your sons and your daughters, and whoever you have in the city, bring them out of this place. For we will destroy this place because their cry has grown huge before Yahweh, and Yahweh has sent us to destroy it".'**

**Lot is offered the opportunity to save any who are related to him. His behaviour has earned**

them a reprieve. We are left to infer that this is because they are also therefore related to Abraham. 'This place', repeated twice, may be seen as derogatory. It has lost its identity.

'Yahweh has sent us to destroy it.' The truth is now out. Although the visit of the angels did give Sodom a last chance, the 'huge cry' that had previously arisen from it had really decided its fate. Now its fate is made known to Lot, and he becomes aware that these are no ordinary strangers. They are here to arrange the destruction of Sodom.

There are times in history when God cries 'enough!'. The Flood was one such. Here is another. Later the exile will be a third. Sin contaminates, and grows, and spreads and then becomes all pervasive - and then God acts.

19.14a 'And Lot went out and spoke to his prospective sons-in-law who were to marry his daughters, and said, "Up, you get out of this place, for Yahweh will destroy the city".'

Lot's two daughters had not yet cohabited with a man (verse 8), so that if they are the daughters in mind any marriage is clearly not yet finalised. However, it may be that Lot had other daughters who were married, in which case we must read 'his sons-in-law who had married his daughters'. Thus the appeal to the men is then an appeal to the family.

'Yahweh will destroy this city'. Lot still holds to a belief in Yahweh, and knows his sons-in-law will know it.

19.14b 'But he seemed to his sons-in-law as one who was being ridiculous.'

They looked on his words as a huge joke. The poor fellow had always been a bit narrow minded with his belief in this strange God. Now he had gone over the top. If you compromise your religion and make family associations with those who do not believe as you do, you lose your credibility. If he had more daughters, Lot had now lost them. That is the price of compromise.

19.15 'And as the morning began the angels put pressure on Lot to hurry up, saying, "Get up. Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, lest you be consumed in the punishment on the iniquity of the city.'

As first light arises the matter is now urgent and there is no time to lose. 'Who are here' suggests he may well have had further daughters. On the other hand 19.31 calls one of them 'the firstborn'.

19.16 'But he hung back, and the men seized his hand, and the hand of his wife, and the hands of his two daughters, Yahweh being merciful to him, and brought him out and placed him outside the city.'

Lot was still not sure. He did not want to leave behind what he had gained through years of toil and effort. But Yahweh had mercy on him. He would not leave him to die. The angels took the family forcibly to the outside of the city. And there Yahweh Himself speaks to him. The change from 'they' to 'he', as in chapter 18, demonstrates a moment of revealing. Now Yahweh Himself takes over Lot's fate.

19.17 'And it happened that, when they had brought them out, he said, "Escape for your life. Do not look behind you. Do not stay in all the Plain. Escape to the mountain lest you be consumed."'

The 'he' has been prepared for by the phrase 'Yahweh being merciful to him'. He is now

directly aware of the voice of Yahweh. Probably there is too a theophany of some kind, possibly in the form in which Yahweh had appeared previously in chapter 18. Lot now knows he is not just dealing with angels. Yahweh is involved. The message is clear. The whole plain of Jordan is to be destroyed. The mountains are the only place of refuge.

19.18-20 'And Lot said to them, "Oh! Not so, my Lord. Look, your servant has found grace in your sight and you have magnified your mercy, which you have showed to me in saving my life. But I cannot escape to the mountain in case evil overtake me, and I die. See, now, this city is near to flee to, and it is a little one. Oh, let me escape there, is it not a little one, and my soul shall live".'

We must remember Lot's state of mind. He is not thinking straight. Events have overwhelmed him. He cannot bear the thought of going into the mountains. Perhaps he is aware of dangers lurking there from thieves and outcasts, and he has grown used to civilisation. He forgets that if Yahweh has protected him up to now He can continue to protect him. All his assurance has gone.

Yet even in his extremity his habits come through. In business he has always been used to treating his associates with great respect when dealing with them, flattering them and making them feel worthy (compare the business transaction in chapter 23). Now he uses the same approach to Yahweh. 'Your servant has found grace in your sight and you have magnified your mercy which you have shown to me --'. Yet it is also from the heart. He does know that God has been good to him.

He then pleads that Yahweh will spare a small city, probably more like a village, so that he can escape there. He stresses how small it is.

'Lot said to *them*'. The angels are still standing there, but they have been joined by Yahweh. This time Lot's 'my Lord' carries its full implication (compare 18.3 for the sudden move from plural to singular). He is speaking to the Lord of the earth. It is significant that the judgment on Sodom is in the angels' sphere, but the deliverance of Lot in accordance with God's covenant with Abraham is Yahweh's concern. That cannot be left to angels.

19.21-22 'And he said to him, "Look, I have accepted you about this as well, that I will not overthrow the city of which you have spoken. But hurry up. Escape there. For I can do nothing until you are come there." Therefore the name of the city was called Zoar (something insignificant).'

Yahweh's patience is boundless. Just one small family and yet for Abraham's sake He delays His judgment until that family is safe, (sadly with one exception). Because of Abraham and his intercession He will not act until then. He grants Lot the concession he pleads for. So does He show to Abraham that He is prepared to spare a city for the sake of a small group of the 'righteous'.

In 14.2 Zoar is called 'Bela, the same is Zoar'. It may well have been the fact that it was all that was left of the destruction that resulted in the change of name to 'insignificant'. The writer sees the irony of the situation.

19.23 'The sun was risen on the earth when Lot came to Zoar.'

It is tempting to read into these descriptions of time some spiritual significance. The dawn of a new life, and then the arising of the sun. But what follows demonstrates that this is not so (as do similar references with regard to Abraham (18.1; 19.27)). They are commonplace indications of time, vividly remembered in an account which is otherwise full of darkness,

which suggest close acquaintance with the events. It does not actually say it is sunrise, only that sufficient time has elapsed for sunrise to have passed and the sun to be clearly visible in the sky.

**19.24-25 'Then Yahweh rained on Sodom and on Gomorrah brimstone and fire from Yahweh out of heaven, and he overthrew those cities and all the Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and all that grew on the ground.'**

The possibility from the description is that we are to see here volcanic action. But we are to recognise that it had been restrained by Yahweh until that very moment. Another strongly suggested alternative is that of a tectonic earthquake resulting in the release of inflammable gases, asphalt and petroleum, ignited by the heat. It may have resulted in the expansion of the Dead Sea at the Southern end. The Dead Sea area is today rich in deposits of asphalt and sulphur. There are references in later extra-Biblical literature to some kind of disaster in this area.

The sites of these cities are as yet unknown although some postulate them as being under the Southern tip of the Dead Sea. We must consider that the configuration of the land may well have altered drastically as a result of the disaster and the passage of time. Suggested mention of the cities at Ebla is still very much open to question.

The suggestion that 'and Gomorrah' is a later addition overlooks the fact that Sodom is being centred on because of the presence of Lot, and that they are regularly seen as a pairing (Genesis 13.10; 14.10-11, compare how only the king of Sodom is mentioned later, Sodom is clearly the primary city; Isaiah 13.19; Jeremiah 49.18; 50.40; Amos 4.11). In fact the whole Plain of Jordan clearly comes under judgment. Yahweh knows the true condition of all the inhabitants. Lot was the exceptional feature that required testing.

If Lot still possesses servants, flocks and herds, they too perish in the conflagration. But his failure to consider them may suggest that by this time Lot is a merchant and no longer involved with herding. The incident with the five kings, when his possessions were all appropriated, may have led him to invest in things which could be more closely watched and hidden. If he does still have servants the indication is that they too have become involved in the perversions and religion of Sodom.

**19.26 'But his wife looked back from behind him and she became a pillar of salt.'**

The final footnote increases the tragedy for Lot and warns against complacency. His wife was possibly a native Sodomite and could not bear to leave her home and family. As they hurry on she lingers behind, refusing to stay with them, and perhaps even turns back to return to her family home ('looked back' is a euphemism. It is not to be taken strictly but as signifying a heart that looks back resulting in further action). She does not believe Yahweh and she does not want to leave her people. We are to understand that Sodom is still in her heart for Yahweh allows it to happen. He knows the thoughts of the heart. Had she been like Lot she would have been spared for Abraham's sake. Whatever the case her delay means that she is caught in the conflagration and is overwhelmed by a deluge of bitumen.

'She became a pillar of salt.' By being overwhelmed with a deluge of bitumen which would soon dissolve her body.

**19.27-28 'And Abraham went up early in the morning to the place where he had stood before Yahweh, and he looked towards Sodom and Gomorrah, and towards all the land of the plain, and saw, and lo, the smoke of the land went up as the smoke of a furnace.'**

We do not know what made Abraham realise that something dreadful had happened, although he was of course half expecting it. Perhaps it was the unearthly glow in the sky, or a minor tremor which they experienced in the camp. Or perhaps he was going in order to see if his plea had been successful. Either way he rose early in the morning and made his way to the mount where he had spoken with Yahweh and there he looked down on the desolation below. What he saw was like a great furnace with smoke billowing up to the heavens.

We are not told what he thought, that is left to each imagination. The writer's concern is that we know that Abraham finally witnessed the judgment that God had warned him of, and to depict the awfulness of it.

19.29 'And so it was, when God destroyed the cities of the plain, that God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot dwelt.'

Throughout the whole account the writer has spoken of Yahweh, for it has had continually in mind the deliverance of Lot who has a part in the covenant because of his relationship with Abraham and his faith in Yahweh, and the writer wants us to know it. But in this solemn summary the writer refers to 'God'. He is now viewing the disaster as a whole from a world viewpoint, with emphasis on the disaster. It was God, the judge of all, who spared Lot, and He did it for Abraham's sake.

'God remembered Abraham'. In all His dealings God remembers those who are faithful to Him, and His actions ever have them in mind. In the end it was because of His love for Abraham that Lot was delivered. Lot owed Abraham more than he ever knew. But the use of the name 'God' suggests that especially in mind is Abraham's intercession before 'the Judge of all the earth'. We are assured that the Judge bore in mind his pleas and his arguments and acted accordingly.

Lot's Subsequent Career (19.30-38).

By choosing the well-watered Circle of Jordan with little regard for the consequences and the fact that it was outside the land chosen by Yahweh for His people, resulting first in being taken prisoner by the five kings, and then in his gradual absorption into the life of Sodom, Lot has taken the path that led to his own impoverishment. His future now is bleak.

He finds himself with nothing, and with nowhere to go. That his choices have resulted in the lowering of his daughters' morals comes out in this passage. And yet he is not entirely forsaken. From his seed will come fruitfulness, nations will be descended from him. Thus there must have been some restitution of the fortunes of his family, for the whole nations of Moabites and Ammonites could not be totally his direct seed. As with later 'Israel' they would be made up also of descendants of servants and tribal members.

19.30 'And Lot went up out of Zoar, and dwelt in the mountains, and his two daughters with him, for he was afraid to dwell in Zoar, and he dwelt in a cave, he and his two daughters.'

Lot's sorry state is emphasised. He is traumatised with what has happened, and it is clear that the devastation was so much beyond what he was expecting that he no longer has any confidence in his situation. Who knows whether Zoar will be next? He dare not risk it. Yahweh was right after all. There is only one place of safety, and that is in the mountains.

We must not underestimate the tumult in Lot's mind. He is not thinking straightly. Had he been he would have fled to his uncle. But he is totally devastated. He may also have been too proud to admit his mistakes. No doubt Abraham had had words to say on the subject of his

choices.

**'He dwelt in a cave, he and his two daughters', emphasising how low he has sunk. No civilisation for him now. And his daughters had sunk with him.**

**19.31 'And the firstborn said to the younger, "Our father is old and there is not a man in the earth (or land) to come in to us after the manner of all the earth".'**

The despair and dreadful condition the girls are in comes out here. They have possibly seen their husbands (o their sisters' husbands) destroyed in the conflagration, they have seen all that they have known violently destroyed. Possibly they were not welcomed in Zoar but seen as bringing the curse on Sodom and Gomorrah with them. They are traumatised. We must not judge their behaviour as normal. They feel that no one will want to have anything to do with them after this. They are alone and deserted.

**19.32 "Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him that we may preserve seed of our father."**

It is an act of desperation. They feel totally estranged from the world outside. Yet the importance of seed to keep the family in being becomes the one thing that totally absorbs their minds. It takes possession of them above all else. Can we doubt that they are clinically depressed and behaving accordingly? The firstborn has one fixation, to have a child, and she persuades her sister to the same. Her tortured mind sees it as the only means of hope. We must not judge too harshly for they were in a sad condition, and relationships were not quite as clear cut in their day, especially in Sodom.

**19.33-35 'And they made their father drink wine that night, and the firstborn went in and lay with her father, and he did not know when she lay down, nor when she arose. And so it was on the next day that the firstborn said to the younger, "See, I lay last night with my father. Let us make him drink wine as well tonight, and you go in and lie with him that we may preserve seed of our father". And they made their father drink wine that night as well, and the younger arose and lay with him, and he knew not when she lay down and when she arose. Thus were both the daughters of Lot with child by their father.'**

The sorry incident brings out their state of mind and the fact that they had something of Sodom in them. Gladly do we learn that Lot knew nothing of the matter at all. He was probably glad to drink himself into unconsciousness, and never dreamed what his daughters were up to. But depression, and desperation and despair drove them to it. It may be that they even had to repeat the experiment, for they would not be satisfied until they were with child. Whatever the case, in the end they were successful.

It is clear that the writer totally disapproves of what they are doing, for he vindicates Lot. There is little doubt that this would later influence the attitude of the Israelites to the Moabites and Ammonites. This incident may have been partly in mind in the prohibition of Deuteronomy 23.3-6; Nehemiah 13.1 although the primary reason is there given. But their actions are never actually condemned.

**19.36 'And the firstborn bore a son and called his name Moab. The same is the father of the Moabites to this day.'**

Loose etymology can make it mean 'of his father', and with names loose connection was all that was asked for. In her depressed condition she has a fierce pride that she has begotten a man from her father. He is pure seed, not a Sodomite. That he became the 'father' of the Moabites suggests that he inter-married with a local tribeswoman and that eventually his

descendants gained ascendancy over the tribe which takes his name.

**19.37** 'And the younger, she also bore a son, and called his name Ben-ammi. The same is the father of the children of Ammon to this day.'

Ben-ammi means 'son of my kinship'. She too exults in bearing seed to her father, although not quite so blatantly. The same applies as with Moab. That this ascendancy is seen as Yahweh's doing comes out in Deuteronomy 2.19 where Yahweh is seen to make clear that He has given their land to them as 'the children of Lot'. Abraham and Abimelech (Genesis 20.1-18).

**20.1** 'And Abraham journeyed from there towards the land of the South, and dwelt between Kadesh and Shur, and he sojourned in Gerar.'

He had been established many years by the Oaks of Mamre but now he moves on, although he would later return to the area. There Sarah died and was buried (23.19), and he himself was buried there (25.9). Isaac later returns there (35.27) and Jacob was also buried there (50.13).

We do not know why Abraham moved on. Perhaps the area of Mamre was suffering from a period of drought, or the arrival of larger groups made it wiser to do so. Or it may be that the catastrophe of the cities of the Plain constrained him to such a move, giving him a feeling that he no longer wanted to be near so terrible a place. It may even be that the catastrophe had rendered the animal feedstuff around unpalatable. Whatever may be the case he now returns to the Negev, spending time there between Kadesh and Shur in the far South, before settling for a time in Gerar, which was probably about 10 miles South East of Gaza. If this identification is correct evidence of Gerar's prosperity at this time has been unearthed.

The movements show that he was seeking a new place to settle and may suggest he was finding it difficult. Not everyone wanted such a family tribe on their doorsteps. 'He sojourned in Gerar'. He feels this is the right place but is probably wary of what the local reaction will be. He had previously had a treaty arrangement with the King of Salem. But there is no mention yet of that here.

**20.2** 'And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister". And Abimelech, King of Gerar, sent and took Sarah.' '

This incident compares with that in 12.10-20, but apart from the claim that Sarah is Abraham's sister, which was his constant practise (verses 12-13) and the 'taking of Sarah' there are no similarities at all between the accounts. Both fit adequately into their particular backgrounds, and the whole tenors of the stories are different. This story is indeed leading up to the covenant between Abraham and Abimelech and is the necessary preparation for it (verses 15-16).

Sarah was an outstandingly beautiful woman, and, even though she has now matured, the bloom of childbearing is on her and there are unquestionably some women who have something about them which gives them an attraction far beyond the norm at all ages. Sarah was clearly one of them. The beauty and attractiveness of a tribeswoman may well have been very different from that of Philistine women. So if Abraham did persist in describing her as his sister when they moved about the surprise is that there were only two such incidents known. Men will move mountains for an alluring woman.

The whole account reads superficially as though it happened over a few days but verses 17-18 suggest a somewhat longer time span. The event did not take place immediately. The King had had time to observe Sarah as she moved about and had clearly built up a passion for her.



**'Sent and took Sarah.'** He may well have waited until Abraham was well away supervising the oversight of his flocks and herds, so that the arrival of men from the local king was unopposed. It is difficult to accept that Abraham would have stood idly by. This was not the Pharaoh of Egypt.

There is about the phrase a suggestion of the typical arrogance of a man who has a high opinion of his own importance. Such behaviour towards women was not uncommon. Indeed he may well have thought that Abraham would be pleased to learn that his matured sister was to marry 'royalty', although such men do not usually consider other people's feelings.

That his intentions were honourable comes out in that he does not violate Sarah. He keeps her safely in preparation for the wedding to come.

**20.3** 'But God came to Abimelech in a dream of the night and said to him, "Behold, you are but a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken. For she is a man's wife."'

The use of 'God' in this passage rather than Yahweh is noteworthy. It arises from the fact that the main action between God and Abimelech is personal, and to Abimelech Yahweh is not God. Nor would God approach Abimelech as 'Yahweh', the covenant God. But Abimelech accepts that his dream comes from a divine being. Later however we are assured that we are to see here the activity of Yahweh (20.18).

'In a dream of the night'. This is a fairly common method by which God communicates with outsiders. Compare 31.24; 41.25; Job 33.15-16. When outsiders receive dreams from God it is always as God and not as Yahweh. Only his prophets receive dreams from Yahweh (15.12; Numbers 12.6).

Abimelech's real crime is that he has taken a woman for the purpose of making her his wife without due enquiry. It is true that he was misled, but his peremptory action prevented him from learning the truth. And unfortunately for him the woman in question was under the direct protection of Yahweh. But no man of ancient times would fail to see that what he had done, however accidentally, was a crime.

**20.4-5** 'Now Abimelech had not come near her, and he said, "Lord, will you slay even a righteous nation? Did he not himself say to me, 'She is my sister'. And she, even she herself, said, 'He is my brother'. In the integrity of my heart and the innocency of my hands I have done this".'

He addresses God as 'Lord', an address of deference, not as Yahweh. 'Even a righteous nation'. The king equates himself with his people. To slay the king is to devastate the people. However there may be in this a reference to the fact, brought out in verse 19, that the conception of children had mysteriously dried up, which if it continued would certainly destroy the 'nation'. But he considers the grounds for these things are unfair for they are 'righteous' (i.e. blameless in this case). He claims he has acted in all innocency. He did not view his peremptory action as anything but his right.

**20.6-7** 'And God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this, and I also withheld you from sinning against me. That is why I did not allow you to touch her. Now therefore, restore the man's wife, for he is a prophet. And he will pray for you and you will live. But, if you do not restore her, know that you will surely die, you and all who are yours".'

God acknowledges that at least he has not deliberately violated a man's wife. But even to have done it 'innocently' would have been a crime against Yahweh because of whose she is. He must

learn to be careful when dealing with the chosen of Yahweh.

Indeed Yahweh's goodness is brought out in that He had prevented the occurrence of what would have been unforgivable. None must forget that Yahweh watches over His own.

'He is a prophet'. Compare on chapter 15 where Abraham is first revealed as a prophet. As a prophet his prayer will be effective. Note that God does not see Abimelech as totally innocent. He needs to be prayed for by the one who has been offended against. And that Abraham is a 'prophet' would give Abimelech pause for thought. Prophets were highly regarded and feared.

'He will pray for you.' Powerful prayer was the evidence of a true prophet who, in special circumstances, alone could prevail with God (Number 12.13; 21.7; Deuteronomy 9.26; 1 Samuel 12.19). We gather from the passage that God is seeking to impress on Abimelech the importance of treating Abraham rightly. It may be that the atmosphere of the time is making it difficult for Abraham with his fearsome band to find somewhere to finally settle. Thus God is preparing the way for their permanent acceptance.

20.8 'And Abimelech rose early in the morning and called all his servants, and told all these things in their ears. And they were deeply afraid.'

That Abimelech is deeply moved by his dream comes out in his reaction. He immediately speaks to his advisers. And they too are afraid, for the intervention of the supernatural in quite this way was contrary to the tenor of their lives. Especially when they learn that they are dealing with an acknowledged 'prophet'.

20.9-10 'Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, "What have you done to us? And in what way have I sinned against you that you have brought on me and my kingdom a great sin. You have done things to me that ought not to be done." And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What did you see that you have done this thing?"

Abimelech's fear stands out clearly. He feels that this great prophet is finding occasion against them. 'What have you done to us? --- What did you see?' In his conscience stricken state, moved by his unearthly dream, he believes that this has all happened because of some prior plan and he wants to find out what failure in them has brought it about - 'in what way have I sinned against you?' This is beyond just an angry man wanting to know why someone has lied to him. He is deeply concerned, almost terrified.

20.11-13 'And Abraham said, "Because I thought, surely the fear of God is not in this place and they will kill me for the sake of my wife. And moreover she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother. And she became my wife. And so it was that when God caused me to wander from my father's house I said to her, 'This is the kindness that you will show me. At every place where we shall come say of me - he is my brother'".'

Abraham is slightly nonplussed, but he seeks to explain the situation. He had thought there was no fear of God here, but as events have proved he was totally wrong, and he has the grace to admit it. The fact was that because his wife was so appealing to men he had used a smoke screen in order to protect himself.

This verse explains a permanent plan not a one off situation. Wherever he went he had said that Sarah was his sister. It had only failed once and that because he had been dealing with an unusual country in Egypt. Now, of course it had brought trouble on him again. The narrative seems to suggest that he was at the least unwise.

**Abimelech is totally relieved to find that there is no supernatural plot against him and immediately agrees to enter into a covenant with Abraham and his family tribe. He is still shaken and will do anything to appease this prophet of God. (He is more terrified of the prophet than of the soldier). So God uses this failure of Abraham's to ensure his future well being.**

**20.14-16 'And Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and menservants and womenservants and gave them to Abraham, and he restored to him Sarah his wife. And Abimelech said, "Look, the land is in front of you, dwell wherever it pleases you." And to Sarah he said, "See I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver, behold it is for you a covering of the eyes to all that are with you and before all men you are righted".'**

**There are three factors here. The two prices to be paid to remedy the sin that has been committed, and the promise of permanent land for them to dwell in. The first is dealt with by the gift to Abraham as the offended party of cattle and slaves, the second by a gift on behalf of Sarah to 'her brother' of a thousand silver pieces. This gift is seen as evidence before men that Sarah is blameless and still pure. Had she been soiled she would not have had this value. It was an ancient custom that the acceptance of a gift demonstrated the vindication of the giver.**

**The third aspect is the guarantee of land to Abraham and his family tribe, together with their herds and flocks, wherever they choose (on free land, of course). They are welcomed and guaranteed that they will not be driven away.**

**We note the inclusion of the fact that Abraham is Sarah's brother. This may be because the compensation has to be given to a close blood relative. But the stated acceptance of the fact may also have been considered necessary in order to stress to all who read the covenant that Abraham's integrity has been accepted by the king. That Abimelech was 'innocent' has also previously been made clear. So both parties are vindicated. This is a necessary part of the covenant.**

**20.17 'And Abraham prayed to God and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his maidservants, and they bore children.'**

**Abraham now fulfils his part of the covenant. He uses his powers as a prophet to remove the 'curse' that is on Abimelech's house. But nothing has been said in the narrative about this situation. This indicates the authenticity of the account. A later writer would have introduced this earlier, but in a covenant between two parties such matters must be handled delicately. To have mentioned this in the main body may have been seen as a slur on the king. But it has to be mentioned here, very delicately, because it is part of the covenant.**

**20.18 'For Yahweh had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.'**

**The final explanation, put much more bluntly, is given in the name of Yahweh. This may well be an added explanatory comment and not part of the original covenant document. The latter, being between Abraham and an outsider had to speak of 'God' so as to suit both parties, but the comment makes clear that this God is Yahweh. It may have been added on in Abraham's copy of the covenant, but more likely it is added by the person who brought this covenant and the following one together.**

**A Son is Born to Sarah and Another Son of Abraham is Cast Out (21.1-21).**

**The account of Yahweh's fulfilment of His promise to Abraham in the giving of a son comes interestingly enough in the covenant made by God with Ishmael. Thus the writing down of the**

detail was by Ishmael. This explains the flatness of the initial introduction in respect of something that would have made Abraham and Sarah ecstatic. Had it not been for this connection with a covenant the birth narrative could well have been carried down in the oral tradition and may well have not been recorded in writing. But while to Ishmael the birth was rather a misfortune than a blessing to the compiler this is an event of outstanding importance.

The first verse in this chapter, 21.1, like 20.18, is introduced by the person who combined the two covenant documents of chapters 20 and 21 together. The former spoke of the fact that Yahweh had closed the wombs of the house of Abimelech, this verse declares that Yahweh has opened the womb of Sarah. He Who can make barren can also make fruitful. It enables the one document to slide into the other.

**21.1 'And Yahweh visited Sarah as he had said and Yahweh did to Sarah as he had spoken.'**

This introductory clause confirms the faithfulness of Yahweh with typical repetition. For He is the faithful One and the carrying out of His promise is about to be revealed.

But in the whole passage from 21.2 to 21.21 the One Who acts is consistently 'God'. This is because the covenant is with one, and recorded by one, who feels he is no longer a part of Yahweh's chosen people, but is cast out. He records it in the name of 'God' Whom he will in future worship. This explains the remarkable fact that in the description of Isaac's birth little religious connotation is brought in. Indeed it is noticeably absent. There is no worship of Yahweh, no message from Yahweh and little of the exultation we would expect at so great a moment. What there is, apart from what is basically necessary, is almost totally secular.

**21.2 'And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the set time of which God had spoken to him.'**

Even Ishmael and his scribe cannot help but be struck that the baby came 'at the set time'. As he looks back he recognises the sovereign power of 'God'. 'The set time' is mentioned in 17.21 and it is significant that this is in the middle of a covenant which very much included Ishmael and for that reason was spoken of as 'God's'.

**21.3-4 'And Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore to him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old as God had commanded him.'**

The narrative is straight and stiff. It describes the birth, and the circumcision, and stresses that the child was truly Sarah's and was, by circumcision, made a participator in the covenant previously made in chapter 17 in obedience to God's command.

The name Isaac means 'laughter', but it is very probable that his full name was 'Isaac-El', in accord with similar names elsewhere, which means 'God laughs', or 'may God laugh (on the child)'. But it was clearly shortened to Isaac.

**21.5 'And Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.'**

Again this connects with the covenant chapter 17, where the ninety nine years was fixed by the fact that there was one year to go to the birth of the promised child. The hundred years is a round number indicating the fullness of time.

**21.6-7 'And Sarah said, "God has made me laugh, everyone who hears will laugh with me", and she said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would breast feed her own children, for I have borne him a son in his old age".'**

The first part of the sentence would seem to confirm that the official name was 'Isaac-el' (yishaq'el). But popularly he was known as Isaac, a reminder of the laughter and joy he had brought. Sarah expresses her thanks to God by declaring the He has given her laughter. Then she immediately goes on to declare how much happiness this has brought to those around who will share her joy. Isaac, she is saying, is well named for he brings laughter. The reader will remember the other kind of laughter mentioned earlier before he was born. But Sarah is now content.

**'And the child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.'**

Isaac would be about three years old when he was weaned (finally eating food other than milk - see I Samuel 1.23). In all this, while God is acknowledged, it is hardly the paean of praise to Yahweh that we might expect. Rather it is a brief but honest summary of the essentials preparatory to what is to come with regard to Ishmael, brought to life by the subsequently added introductory phrase (verse 1).

Do we detect in all this some bitterness on behalf of one whose birth was not declared to be accompanied by laughter and whose birth was not described as an occasion of general rejoicing, but indeed became an embarrassment rather than being celebrated by a feast? (see chapter 16).

**21.9 'And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking (or 'playing').'**

The word translated 'mocking' can have a variety of meanings. It really indicates 'enjoying or amusing oneself'. This could be totally innocent, or at the expense of others (thus 'mocking') - compare its use in 19.14. It can mean (with 'eth) 'fondling' a woman (26.8). No final decision can be made on its meaning here. It may simply mean that they were playing together as equals, but this is unlikely in view of Ishmael's age (he is about 16, and a man). Or it could suggest unpleasantness of either a slight (making a fool of), or of a more abhorrent kind. If Ishmael was responsible for this record then the word may be deliberately used vaguely to give the impression of innocence. What he saw as 'playing' others may have seen in a different light.

The fact that Abraham is prepared even to consider expulsion (verse 11), very much against his will until Yahweh intervenes, would suggest it was more than just innocent fun. To send away a slave-wife and a son was a grave act, and in some societies at the time a son born under the method used by Sarah would be sacrosanct and could not be turned out. This suggests that 'playing' is a euphemism for something far worse.

It is again emphasised that Hagar is an Egyptian. But that may have been how she was known in comparison with another Hagar. It may, however, contain a hint of rancour as Ishmael remembers how his mother was treated as a foreigner, or even of pride. Egyptians were not short in national pride. They saw themselves as superior.

**21.10 'As a result she said to Abraham, "Cast out this bondwoman and her son, for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac".'**

Sarah had done nothing for three or more years. Furthermore she has always been very submissive to her husband. What then provokes this sudden demand that Abraham deal with matters so drastically against his will. Was it jealousy for her son's position? But she could have no real doubt that Isaac would take over leadership of the tribe, for God had promised it. Was it a fear of something she saw in Ishmael's behaviour, some veiled threat to her son? All

we know is that something spurred her on to make this demand.

**'This bondwoman'. One can see the curl on her beautiful lip as she says it. It is deliberately derogatory, drawing attention to how Hagar is seen, at least by her. The stinging words were clearly remembered by Ishmael.**

**'Shall not be heir with my son Isaac.' She wanted everything for Isaac. He had the prime inheritance but she wanted more. Happily this attitude was not later maintained between the two sons for they come together to bury Abraham (25.9). And there too we learn that although Isaac did receive the prime inheritance, Abraham's other sons were not forgotten (25.5-6).**

**21.11 'And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight on account of his son.'**

**Abraham clearly loved Ishmael deeply. This does suggest that Sarah must have had some sound grounds for what she was suggesting. As patriarch he had to act justly and fairly, and we know he was a just and fair man. He would not have given the matter consideration without just cause.**

**But this may also reflect the memory that Ishmael carried with him, the certainty that in spite of all his father loved him deeply.**

**21.12 'And God said to Abraham, "Let it not be grievous in your sight because of the lad and because of your bondwoman. In all that Sarah says to you, listen to her voice. For in Isaac shall your seed be called. And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is your seed".'**

**God's approval to the plan must indicate that there were grounds for the expulsion (even granted that it was within His purpose). Such an expulsion would not take place lightly, for Ishmael would no doubt have some support in the family tribe, and external evidence demonstrates that the casting out of a bondwoman's son would under normal circumstances be frowned on. God is calling Abraham to his duty. And yet in so doing He confirms His promises to Ishmael.**

**'For in Isaac shall your seed be called'. The future fulfilment of the central promise of God lies in Isaac. This expulsion will not affect the Promise.**

**21.14a "And Abraham rose up early in the morning and took bread and a water-skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the boy, and sent her away.'**

**The emphasis is on the expulsion of Hagar herself. This supports the view that we have here Ishmael's memory of the picture. He cannot forget that Abraham sent his mother away. He grieves, not for himself for he is possibly aware that he has committed some fault, but for her. The word for 'boy' is neutral. It can equally mean a young man. It may also suggest that Abraham sees her as the one with the strength to cope with the situation.**

**'Took bread --- and the lad, and sent her away.' The blame is put on Hagar's shoulders. It is she who is sent away at Sarah's request. The lad goes with her. He is possibly not yet considered to be of age. He is in fact about fifteen years old. (As forty appears to be looked on as the age for marrying a fifteen year old might not then have been looked on as mature).**

**Abraham arises himself to see to the matter. The detail is all remembered. How could Ishmael ever forget it? The early morning rise. Abraham, with heavy heart, providing food and water and putting them on Hagar's shoulder. It must be remembered that she is the servantwoman and Ishmael is the patriarch's son. It is not right that he carries the burden.**

**21.14b 'And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.'**

**Why does she not again make for Egypt as she had done before? (16.7). There is no attempt here. Why does she avoid the highways? Is she aware of some shame that will prevent her acceptance in Egypt that was not there before? Or is she determined to stay within reach of her son's inheritance?**

**It is quite clear in all this that Hagar is the dominant person. It is she who takes over and makes the decisions. It has been clear from the beginning that she was very strongminded, and years of servitude have hardened her as she has carried her grievance through the years. Ishmael may be a little bewildered at the turn of events, but not Hagar. She takes control.**

**21.15 'And the water in the water-skin was spent and she heaved the lad under one of the shrubs.'**

**The water runs out and even the hardest person cannot do without water. As they become more and more parched their strength fails, the young man's first for he is not yet fully matured and he has not had to fight for himself as Hagar has. Then at length he collapses and Hagar has this further burden to bear. Yet bravely she struggles on with him until she knows her cause is lost. (Like many strong women she may have been a very awkward person, but we cannot help but admire her now, as the writer does as well. He does not have to fill in the details. All his readers know the perils of the burning sun and the wilderness).**

**'She heaved the lad under one of the shrubs'. A last desperate effort. The only shelter within reach. And she does what she can for her son.**

**21.16 'And she went and sat down in front of him a good way off, as it were a bowshot, for she said, "Let me not look on the death of my boy." And she sat opposite him and wept.'**

**She cannot bear to watch him die, yet she cannot bear to leave him. She must be within sight if his eyes open again. Yet she cannot remain too close. Her deep grief is clear. It is almost more than she can bear.**

**21.17 'And God heard the voice of the young man, and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven and said to her, "What is wrong with you, Hagar? Don't be afraid. For God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Get up. Lift the lad up and support him firmly with your hand. For I will make him a great nation".'**

**The name Ishmael meant 'God has heard'. In the extremity he is in the lad prays, and God hears. Note that it is his prayer that is heard. He is a son of Abraham, and God will hear for Abraham's sake.**

**'The angel of God'. Similar to the 'angel of Yahweh', but 'Yahweh' cannot be used here for Ishmael is now outside the covenant line. It is to 'God' that he will henceforth look.**

**"What is wrong with you Hagar?" It is as though God says, 'this is not like you, Hagar, to give up, and especially when there is help within reach. The lad needs you now as never before. Do not let him down'.**

**"For I will make him a great nation." Does she not remember His covenant? Does she think He will let the lad to whom He has made these great promises die? The promise renewed under these circumstances (and in verse 13) is the original reason for the writing of the record.**

**21.19 'And God opened her eyes and she saw a spring of water, and she went and filled the**

**water-skin with water and gave the lad drink.'**

**In all her struggles and wanderings a hand had unknowingly guided her. Where she thought there was nothing there was salvation. Unknowingly she had struggled to where there was a small spring. But without the voice of God she would never have known.**

**She has no thought for herself. Her one concern is for her son. She immediately fills the wine-skin and gives water to her son. In all this her toughness too comes out. She is a survivor. Without her Ishmael would have been doomed.**

**The detail in the narrative stresses that it is recorded at the instigation of one who was there. It is not overplayed, yet it conveys the heart of the matter. And the subtle nuances are too deep to be just an invention of a storyteller. All through this account was written from experience of the events, and from a particular viewpoint. The comparative briefness of the birth of Isaac, that event that should have been written in gold, compared with the detail of the experiences of Ishmael, even to the awareness of his deepest feelings, confirm that we have here a record compiled by him. And the renewal of the covenant under the most difficult of circumstances explains why it was put into writing.**

**21.20-21 'And God was with the lad and he grew, and he dwelt in the wilderness and became an archer. And he dwelt in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took him a wife out of the land of Egypt.'**

**This clear addition to the account, with its local colour, was no doubt either added to the covenant tablet at a later date or when it was combined with others to form a connected sequence.**

**'He dwelt in the wilderness and became an archer'. He soon learned to adapt to his surroundings and became a wilderness wanderer, and a hunter both of man and beast as he lived out his precarious existence. The wilderness in which he established himself, and later his tribe, (Abraham's sons were born to be leaders) was the wilderness of Paran, between Palestine and Egypt in the Sinai region near the Gulf of Aqabah.**

**'And his mother took him a wife out of the land of Egypt'. The hand of his strong-minded mother continues to influence him. She is proud of her Egyptian background and does not want him to marry just anyone. His relatives are closed to him and she takes the only possible alternative.**

**Hagar stands out throughout as a strong minded, resourceful woman. Later we read of a tribe called the Hagrites who were connected with the tents of Edom and the Ishmaelites, and Moab (Psalm 83.6). See also 1 Chronicles 5.10, 19 where they are connected with Jetur and Naphish, sons of Ishmael (Genesis 25.15). It may be that she even established her own tribe, although the connection may be a coincidence.**

**Abraham Renews His Covenant With Abimelech in 'the Land of the Philistines' (Genesis 21.22 to 34).**

**This passage contains the first mention of 'Philistines' as being in the land. Some have doubted this on the grounds that the Philistines arrived later in 12th century BC in the wave of Sea Peoples invading among others the coasts of Lebanon, ancient Phoenicia, sweeping down through the coastal plains of Palestine (named after them) and troubling Egypt, where they are referred to as Prst.**

**It is, of course, true that in the sense of the Philistines as a ruling nation and a threat to others**



**in Palestine, the 12th century BC is the commencement of their presence, but the peoples from whom they came were certainly evidenced in the Ancient Near East before that.**

**There is clear archaeological evidence of trade between Caphtor (home of the Philistines - see 10.14; Jeremiah 47.4; Amos 9.7) and the mainland around this time, including trade with Ugarit and Hazor, and also Egypt; and a tablet from Mari (18th century BC) records the sending of gifts from the king of Hazor to Kaptara (Caphtor). There is therefore nothing unlikely in a trading set up being established in Palestine around this time, on the trading route between Mesopotamia and Egypt, by people from Caphtor, whence came the Philistines (Jeremiah 47.4; Amos 9.7). They were a sea people.**

**'Philistines' may be a later modernisation of an archaic term for them originally found in the text, so that the reader could identify them, but as we do not know the origin of the name, it may easily have applied to a section of the people of Caphtor in the time of Abraham, some of whom came as peaceful traders to Palestine long before their later arrival. On the whole people only get mentioned in inscriptions when they have made their presence felt.**

**The reference in Genesis 21 to 'the land of the Philistines' may thus simply be an indication of the presence of a trading group from Caphtor who have established themselves there, not necessarily very numerous, but very noteworthy in that part of Canaan. It is possibly significant that Abimelech is called king of Gerar in 20.2 but king of the Philistines in 26.1, 8; suggesting either a later increase in the Philistine presence, or that Abraham did not know who they were until later, which would be evidence of the genuine ancient provenance of the accounts. (He first arrives in the region of Gerar and meets an unknown people, he later learns that the area is called by many 'the land of the Philistines', he then discovers that it is Philistines with whom he has been dealing at Gerar, and all this is discovered between the recording of the different covenants).**

**21.22 'And so it was at that time that Abimelech, and Phicol the captain of his host, spoke to Abraham saying, "God is with you in all that you do. Now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me, nor with my son, nor with my son's son. But in accordance with the kindness that I have done to you, you shall do to me and to the land wherein you have sojourned".'**

**While it is clear that this has in mind Abraham's reputation as a 'prophet', who thus has extraordinary powers and influence with the divine, gained in chapter 20, it would not have arisen unless Abraham's family tribe with its private army had been seen as a real threat (21.23), and that clearly indicates that the 'host' over which Phicol is captain is not all that large. They are not speaking as a powerful nation but as a fair sized but vulnerable group (compare 26.16).**

**The names Abimelech and Phicol occur again in chapter 26 (see especially verse 26). This may be because young men have grown old, or because the names Abimelech and Phicol were titles assumed by the leader and military captain of the group. We can compare the Egyptian title 'Pharaoh' which was used as a name and how 'Tartan' was the name applied to Assyrian generals (2 Kings 18.17; Isaiah 20.1) - as we know from inscriptions.**

**Abimelech is a Semitic name meaning 'Melech (or 'the divine king' - later known as Molech to the Israelites because the vowels were changed to indicate abomination) is my father'. It is used of Achish, the Philistine king of Gath, in the superscription to Psalm 34, demonstrating its connection with the Philistines. It would be prudent for the leader of foreign traders to have a Semitic sounding name. Phicol is of unknown provenance.**

**'God is with you in all that you do'. Abraham's local reputation as a prophet has never been**

forgotten. The group are somewhat afraid of his divine connections.

**'Now therefore swear to me here by God --'. The specific aim of the approach is a treaty, confirming the previous treaty and expanding it. In return for certain rights yet to be agreed the tribe were to swear friendship with Abimelech and his people. 'The kindness that I have shown to you' covers some of those rights.**

**21.24 'And Abraham said, "I will swear".'**

**Abraham confirms that he wishes to live at peace and is happy to agree to a renewal of the treaty, but takes the opportunity to deal with certain matters that need sorting out.**

**21.25 'And Abraham reprov'd Abimelech because of the well of water which Abimelech's servants had violently taken away.'**

**The well, clearly fed by a powerful spring, must have been of great importance for it to come up at this point, which was why both groups wanted it. Indeed regular supplies of water were always important in all periods, but this must have been exceptional. That is why Abraham wants it brought within any covenant. It was so important that it in fact became the centre of their operations.**

**Digging a well satisfactorily could be a difficult and time consuming task, and when it was completed and the well producing satisfactorily it gave great satisfaction. It was not a happy thing therefore that it had then been snatched from them by force.**

**The incident does indicate that all was not necessarily well between the two groups. Presumably Abraham has not retaliated because he has considered the effect on the relationship between the two groups, or it may be that it was very recent and he was still considering what to do, but it clearly rankled. Now the opportunity had come to solve the matter.**

**21.26 'And Abimelech said, "I do not know who has done this thing, nor did you tell me, nor yet have I heard of it until today.'"**

**This may be politician's talk or it may be true. But his approach in itself suggests that Abimelech is aware of a certain uneasy feeling between the two groups. Now he has at least a partial explanation.**

**21.27 'And Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and they two made a covenant.'**

**Abraham makes a payment to Abimelech. He recognises that this is Abimelech's territory and that compensation must be paid for the use of certain facilities (compare the tithes paid to Mechizedek (14.20). 'And they made a treaty'. Terms of agreement are hammered out.**

**21.28-30 'And Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves. And Abimelech said to Abraham "What do these seven ewe lambs which you have set by themselves mean?" And he said, "You will take these seven ewe lambs of my hand that it may be a witness to me that I have dug this well".'**

**The well is so important that Abraham wants it confirmed by a specific ceremony. The ceremony does not necessarily mean that Abimelech does not know the significance of the seven lambs. Indeed we are probably to recognise that he does. There is no point in a ceremony if it is not understood. They are going through the formal ceremony in a generally recognised**

**procedure with stereotyped questions and answers. Abraham sets aside the ewe lambs, Abimelech asks what they mean, then Abraham confirms their significance.**

**So a solemn agreement is concluded within the larger covenant. It was an ancient custom that the acceptance of a gift included recognition of the just claim of the giver.**

**The seven ewe lambs were probably intended to signify the whole price paid by Abraham in verse 27, seven being the number of divine perfection and completeness. Alternately they may have been the price paid for use of the specific well. From now on both sides will recognise that the well has been dug by, and its use officially guaranteed to, Abraham and his group.**

**21.31 'Wherefore he called that place Beersheba, when there they swore, both of them.' Beersheba means 'the well of seven', and is the name given to that particular well. The name is given to remind both sides of the treaty that has been made about it, sealed by the giving of the seven ewe lambs.**

**Genesis 21.14 refers to the wilderness of Beersheba. It could be that Abraham takes the well known name of the wilderness and applies it to the well because it is appropriate. Alternately it may be that the wilderness originally had another name, altered to Beersheba when Beersheba became well known, for the name Beersheba is eventually applied to a city. (Genesis 26.33 refers to a city of Beersheba, whose name appeared subsequently to that time, and that is the general meaning of Beersheba later on).**

**21.32 'So they made a covenant at Beersheba, and Abimelech rose up, and Phicol the captain of his host, and they returned into the land of the Philistines.'**

**The treaty having been satisfactorily concluded the pair return to their land which is called 'the land of the Philistines (see above prior to verse 1). In a sense, of course they are already in the land of the Philistines (verse 34) but the differentiation is made to demonstrate that now this part they have left is under Abraham's jurisdiction, with their agreement. We may possibly differentiate between the land actually occupied by the Philistines and that over which they have final control.**

**21.33 'And Abraham planted a Tamarisk tree at Beersheba and called there on the name of Yahweh, the Everlasting God - El 'Olam.'**

**It may be that the Philistines in Gerar worshipped El 'Olam whom, because of the significance of his name Abraham accepted as being Yahweh for he knew Yahweh to be God from everlasting to everlasting (there was no concept of 'eternity'. 'Olam meant from time past to time future), compare El Elyon (14.22).**

**The Tamarisk tree was native to the area. It was to mark and possibly to provide shelter over the well. Thus the thirsty passer by, needing water, would see the well was there.**

**'Called there on the name of Yahweh'. As priest of the tribe he originated cult worship there. It became a shrine to the goodness of God, the central place of worship for his family tribe.**

**21.34 'And Abraham sojourned in the land of the Philistines many days.' Notice the stress on the fact that he is a sojourner. Though he has settled down there the land is not his people's, as one day it will be. He still has to walk by faith.**

**'In the land of the Philistines.' It is clear that the area where they were was acknowledged to be under the control of the Philistine group. This may not be the name of the area but just an acknowledgement of the facts.**

**'Many days.'** The idea of Abraham wandering continually around from place to place is incorrect. Here 'many days' probably means a number of years. He was there when Isaac was born. He was there when Isaac was a growing lad (chapter 22). Of course, the flocks and herds had to be moved about to find grazing, but this was done from a permanent centre.

### **The Ultimate Test (22.1-19).**

Abraham had been called by Yahweh to leave his home, his kinsfolk and his country to go to a new land which God had purposed for him. His spiritual life was not smooth. He was not without testing. The very call itself was a test. The long wait for Isaac was a test. The incident of Sodom and Gomorrah was a test. But he had come through it all with his faith enhanced. Now he would face the greatest test of all.

**22.1 'And so it was that after these things God put Abraham to the test and said to him, "Abraham". And he said "Here I am".'**

The use of 'God' is significant. Previously when 'God' has been used it has been when foreign elements have been involved, for example in the wider covenant of chapter 17; with Hagar after Ishmael had been cast out; and in his dealings with Abimelech.

Yet it is not surprising here, for this test is not given by God as Yahweh the covenant God. It strikes at the very heart of the covenant. It is given by 'God', God the Almighty, the Most High God, Lord of Heaven and Earth (14.22; 17.1).

We can compare with this how a man who is a judge may have a son whom he loves, but one day, when the son is brought before his court he has to forget the sonship and behave as a judge. In a sense that is what Yahweh does here. This demonstrates that this incident has a larger purpose than just a personal issue between Yahweh and Abraham. It is a vindication before the world. Abraham must be shown to the world as totally beyond reproach.

It is idle to speculate on why the test was made. It may have been because Abraham was questioning his own willingness to do what some people round about him were willing to do, offer their own sons as sacrifices, and was greatly disturbed by the problem. It may have been that he was indeed being chided by others as not loving his God enough because he did not engage in child sacrifice. It may be that he himself felt that he was not sufficiently demonstrating his love for Yahweh. Or perhaps he has become concerned that he loves his son too much so that it has hindered his love for Yahweh.

Certainly the climate in Canaan was such that few would look askance at what he was asked to do, although child sacrifice, while known, was not a common feature of life there (see Leviticus 18.21; Deuteronomy 12.31; Psalm 106.37-38; 2 Kings 16.3; 21.6; Isaiah 57.5; Ezekiel 16.20-21; 20.26). It was looked on as the ultimate gift to God (Judges 11.30-40; 2 Kings 3.27).

It may not be a coincidence that child sacrifice was linked with Molech (Leviticus 18.21; 20.3;) or Melech (Isaiah 57.9 (translated 'king'). Melech is the original name, the 'o' was a change made to indicate an abomination using the vowel sounds of bosheth, 'shame'. His name appears in Abimelech. It is possible that these Philistine traders were worshippers of Melech.

But the importance of the narrative is that it demonstrates that, at whatever the cost, Abraham was willing to obey Yahweh, and would not even withhold from Him what he treasured most.

It is noteworthy that the stress is put on the fact that this is a test. We are to suspect immediately that it was not to be literally carried out. As always in the first part of Genesis the narrative is a covenant narrative, for the incident leads on to a re-establishing of the covenant

(verses 16-18) in even more emphatic form. Thus it would be put in writing and added to the sacred covenant tablets already held.

22.2 'And he said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, even Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah (LXX has 'land of the height' - 'upsele'; the Syriac translation of the Old Testament has 'land of the Amorites') and offer him there for a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you."

The land of 'Moriah' is not known elsewhere although a Mount 'Moriah' (slightly different etymologically) is later found in the vicinity of Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 3.1-2) as the Mount on which the Temple was built. But the latter passage does not mention this incident (as we would have expected if they were identical), and here it is not the name of a mountain. It is significant in this regard that Abraham does not name the site as 'Moriah' but as 'Yahweh yir'eh' (verse 14).

In view of the fact that Jerusalem was at this stage a city occupied by the Jebusites it is not likely that Mount Moriah is in view.

It was a 'three day journey' i.e not very far, in contrast with a 'seven day journey', for they arrived within sight of it 'on the third day' (within one and a half to two and a half days).

The emphasis by God that He is asking for the ultimate sacrifice - 'your *son*, your *only* son, whom *you love*' - demonstrates already that it is a test, but so far as Abraham is concerned it is a very real one. The stress is interesting. It is not on the fact that he is the covenant son, but that he is the 'only beloved' son. It cannot help but remind us of another 'Only Beloved Son' of later times Who was sacrificed on our behalf. So the sacrifice requested was deeply personal, his most treasured possession.

Isaac is of course not literally his 'only son', and the phrase must rather mean 'the heir', the one on whom everything is centred, the only son of the primary marriage. Thus the phrase links directly with the covenant. He is not only called on to offer the one dearest to his heart, but the one through whom all the covenant promises are to be fulfilled. He is called on to sacrifice everything he has ever lived for.

We are not told what passed through his mind. Sacrifice the one through whom the covenant would be fulfilled (17.19,21)? He did not even stop to question. He obeyed unquestioningly. Yahweh would see to the rest. He had trusted Him so far, he would trust Him to the end.

He does not even question the morality of it. As a prophet of God he knows when God has spoken, and if it is His command it can only be right. (Only one who has had unique experiences of God and actually hears the voice of God can have such certainty. For such it was not an issue that required consideration for 'God had spoken'). The final consequence, of course, is that God finally demonstrates to His people once and for all that He does not want such sacrifices.

This episode compares very specifically with that in chapter 12. There he was called to go to a country that Yahweh had chosen for him, here he is called to go to a mountain that God has chosen for him. Yet the second contradicts the first because of its purpose. We cannot doubt that this is the greater test of faith. As Abraham grows in obedience the tests become harder.

22.3-4 'And Abraham rose early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place afar off.'

**'Rose early in the morning'. Compare 21.14. Is this a deliberate connection between the two tests to demonstrate their connection? Then he rose early in the morning to lose one son, now he does the same with the other. In both cases he obeys without question. The two men would accompany them both for safety reasons and to help with luggage.**

**'Went to the place of which God had told him.' Emphasis is laid on his obedience to God. The deliberate emphasis on 'God' as opposed to 'Yahweh' brings out the chill in the atmosphere. He obeys but his heart is frozen. What must have been his thoughts when at last he sees the place 'afar off', i.e in the distance.**

**'On the third day.' Abraham had had plenty of time to think over what he had to do. This was no momentary act based on a burst of enthusiasm and ecstasy, but a considered, thoughtful, heart-rending act about which, with a steady will, he was willing to proceed.**

**22.5 'And Abraham said to his young men, "You stay here with the ass and I and the lad will go yonder, and we will worship and come again to you."**

**'We will come again to you'. Was this just camouflage to the young men? There is no reason to think so. They would soon find out the truth and would recognise that it was a custom of the land. Or did he want to hide the truth from Isaac until the last moment? But surely he should have prepared Isaac for his part in the sacrifice to make it more meaningful. It does suggest rather that Abraham believes that somehow God will give him his son back again. After all He had enabled Sarah to give birth, and has made His unbreakable promise in the covenant.**

**But there was nothing unusual about going up into a mountain to pray when on a journey, and at present it would not seem strange to the men, although they must have wondered why he was not taking a lamb.**

**The next section is given in full detail with every aspect emphasised, and when the actual moment comes, in even greater detail. The writer seeks to build up the suspense right to the end.**

**22.6 'And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it on Isaac his son, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife, and they went both of them together.'**

**Isaac carries the wood. Abraham has to carry the fire and knife, both dangerous to a young lad, the former at least requiring great care. This does demonstrate that Isaac has grown somewhat and is now a lad of some strength.**

**22.7 'And Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father." And he said, "I'm here, my son." And he said, "Look, the fire and the wood. But where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"'**

**The men must previously have wondered the same. It stood out a mile. But Isaac has clearly been pondering over it and now cannot resist the question which must have gone like a dagger into his father's heart. And he is obviously of an age to be aware of the details of such an offering and to be aware that lambs do not just come from nowhere. But it is clear he does not know of the purpose of the visit.**

**Isaac's question brings out that already as a young lad he is quite familiar with the idea of the sacrificial lamb and that at this stage the 'burnt offering' (literally 'that which goes up') is the regular sacrifice.**

**22.8 'And Abraham said, "God will provide himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son."**

What a wealth of meaning is found in these words. 'God will provide'. For Isaac they meant that his father believed that God would let him have a lamb from somewhere. But was he beginning to get a little uneasy? For Abraham it was a statement of belief that God would somehow make all things right. But for us it is far more significant. For we know that God did provide Himself as a Lamb for the offering, the Lamb of God Who would take away the sin of the world. And it makes us look at what this was costing Abraham, and realise how much it must have cost God. God did not ask Abraham to do something that He would not do Himself.

**22.8b 'So they went both of them together.'**

The repetition of the phrase (compare verse 6) brings out the length of the journey in the mind of Abraham. It must have seemed that they went on and on. Getting ever nearer to the fateful place.

**22.9 'And they came to the place of which God had told him, and Abraham built the altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar on the wood.'**

Every moment of agony is dragged out by the writer. The slow careful procedure, the puzzled but possibly apprehensive lad, Isaac, the so well known preparations, and then the moment of truth. Abraham takes his son and binds him with ropes. Does either say anything? What can they say? We do not know. But we do know what they must have felt; Isaac, puzzled, hurt, yet submissive and Abraham, torn in two yet obedient.

**22.10 'And Abraham stretched forth his hand to slay his son.'**

Obedient to the end, he knew he must obey God's absolute command. With nerves of steel he takes the final step in making the ultimate sacrifice. He lifts the knife ready to plunge it into the body of his son. The writer brings out the pathos. Not Isaac, not the lad, but 'his son'.

Centuries later another Father would send His Son to be a sacrifice, but in His case there would be no intervention, no voice from Heaven. For He was the One to whom the coming substitution pointed. He had to carry it through to the bitter end for the salvation of the world.

**22.11-12 'And the angel of Yahweh called to him from Heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham." And he said, "Here I am." And he said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad, neither do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing the you have not withheld your son, your only son from me."'**

At last the change to the name Yahweh. The covenant has not been forgotten. The angel of Yahweh is clearly God Himself for He says, "you have not withheld your only son 'from Me'."

'Now I know that you fear God.' 'I know' - an anthropomorphism. It was not that God needed to be convinced of Abraham's faithfulness. He is the One Who knows the heart. It was rather that Abraham might be reassured, and that the world might later know, that Abraham would hold nothing back from God whatever the cost. This act has brought out Abraham's total obedience and submission. He had passed the ultimate test.

To 'fear God' means to have such a reverence and awe for Him that we obey Him. It is strongly linked to the idea of obedience (compare 20.11; 42.18; 2 Kings 4.1; Job 1.1, 8; Proverbs 1.7; Isaiah 11.2). Thus God wants Abraham to know that He fully appreciates what he has been willing to do.

**22.13 'And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a ram caught in the thicket by**

his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son.'

To us it may seem an afterthought, but to Abraham it is one great swell of praise to Yahweh. Never had he offered a ram with more gratitude and with more praise in his heart. Whatever the normal significance of the burnt offering it is clearly stated that in this particular case it is substitutionary. It replaces his son. The burnt offering was in fact more of a total offering to God of worship and praise and dedication, and it was this for Abraham. But as ever it included the shedding of blood and was thus a reminder that sin produced death, the death of the victim in the place of the guilty one.

22.14 'And Abraham called the name of that place 'Yahweh Yir'eh'. As it is said to this day, "In the mount of Yahweh it will be provided".'

The naming of a place was an important matter for ancient peoples, especially when it commemorated a theophany. For that place became accepted as a sacred place, and many would go there for religious purposes. But no well known name is given here. It was a private naming in a spot which, though it would ever be sacred to Abraham, would not be known to the world. 'Yahweh yir'eh' means 'God sees'. What it did result in was a well known proverb which the editor of the tablets adds on. We may paraphrase the comment 'Yahweh will provide for those who truly seek Him.'

22.15-18 'And the angel of Yahweh called to Abraham a second time out of heaven, and said, "By myself have I sworn, the word of Yahweh, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, that in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the sea shore, and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice".'

This is the covenant on which the whole narrative is centred. The text has stressed the cost to Abraham in being willing to give his son, his only son, whom he loves, and this is confirmed here. Isaac is his only full son as born of his true wife. Hagar is not seen as a primary wife (although she is a wife), but more as a surrogate mother. 'Only son' therefore seems to carry the connotation of 'the heir' on whom everything is centred.

'By myself have I sworn'. Hebrews 6.13 comments on this verse, 'because He could swear by no greater, He swore by Himself'. We must say it reverently. Yahweh swears on His own eternal existence. Nothing could confirm the covenant more emphatically than that. Only the greatness of what Abraham had done could even begin to merit such a privilege. It expresses a unique relationship.

'The word of Yahweh' (ne'um Yahweh). A typical prophetic phrase emphasising that Abraham is a prophet. It emphasis the truth and reality of that which it describes.

'Because you have done this thing --'. But the covenant had already been given and ratified. Thus we see that what Abraham has done here has been the result of his life of constant faithfulness. He has done this thing because he has been fashioned by a life of faithful obedience. He Who knows the end from the beginning had seen what Abraham would be and rewarded him accordingly.

'Have not withheld your son, your only son --'. The price he was willing to pay is again stressed, with a special emphasis on the only son.

The covenant is repeated and reconfirmed. Continual blessing, a multitude of descendants, his



seed 'possessing the gates of their enemies'. The gates were the common meeting place, the place where the rulers and elders would gather to rule the city. To possess the gates was to have rule over them. But above all, forcefully repeated, in him would all the nations of the world be blessed.

It may be that in these past hours Abraham had seen ahead the possible destruction of the covenant in the destruction of his son. But he had gone ahead, confident that if necessary God could bring Isaac back to life, and now he receives his son back again and the covenant confirmed more firmly than ever.

**22.19 'So Abraham returned to his young men and they rose up and went together to Beersheba, and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba.'**

To the young men it possibly looked as though nothing unusual had happened, apart from the fact that their master must have seemed somewhat more cheerful and Isaac somewhat more thoughtful. We do not know whether he too was aware of the theophany, but undoubtedly his father must have given him some explanation.

And they returned to Beersheba, and dwelt there. Life would go on as usual. But it would never be the same again. Whatever high experiences we have of God we must always return to earth and dwell there. We cannot live always in the land of Moriah.

**The Sons of Nahor and the Family Connection of Rebekah (22.20-24).**

The incident at Mount Moriah was the climax of Abraham's life. All that remains is the closing down of his life. The stress in chapter 22.20 to 24.67 is the new beginnings in Isaac, the chosen heir.

This family record is the introduction to chapter 24. It is explaining the knowledge of a daughter that persuaded Abraham to send his steward to Nahor's family to find a wife for Isaac. It was thus included in the original covenant record which included chapter 24. It may be that the contract detailed in chapter 23 was also incorporated in that covenant record at the time. This would explain why it divides 22.20-24 from the passage it introduces.

Alternatively chapter 23 may have been placed within the latter by the editor. It is possible that this happened while Joseph was in authority in Egypt, when it would have been likely that the life history and background of so important a man would be set down in writing from the written records available. Alternately it may have been done later by Moses himself from the covenant records. In either case it was done because the editor knew that the news of the existence of Rebekah reached Abraham before the death of Sarah, and that Sarah died before Isaac married Rebekah. We will consider why it was introduced shortly.

It is clear that many years have passed since the previous incident, silent years because there was no revelation from Yahweh. It is not the history of Abraham that is written down, but the history of Yahweh in His dealings with Abraham.

This introduction of a tablet with a genealogy was a regular feature of such ancient tablets.

**22.20-21 'And so it was after these things that Abraham was told, saying, "Behold, Milcah, she also has borne children to your brother Nahor. Uz, his firstborn, and Buz, his brother, and Kemuel the father of Aram.'**

It was quite natural that news would come through to Abraham about his brother's family. It may have been because he himself sent a messenger to enquire whether there was a suitable

wife for his son there, or because Nahor kept in contact with his elder brother who was thus aware of family affairs. The former is very likely and would explain why full details of the family genealogy were sent to Abraham.

As we have previously been told, Milcah was the daughter of Haran, who had died young, and was married to Nahor (11.29). She was clearly fruitful and bore him eight sons listed in this passage. The names are typical of the period and are attested either elsewhere in the Old Testament or in cuneiform sources. For Uz compare 10.23 where an Uz is a descendant of an earlier Aram, also 36.28. Job lived in 'the land of Uz' (Job 1.1). For Buz compare 1 Chronicles 5.14; Job 32.2, 6; Jeremiah 25.23. For Kemuel compare Numbers 34.24; 1 Chronicles 27.17. Aram is well associated with the area in which they dwelt.

**22.22 'And Chesed, and Hazo, and Pildash, and Jidlaph, and Bethuel. And Bethuel begat Rebekah. These eight did Milcah bear to Nahor, Abraham's brother.'**

For Bethuel compare 1 Chronicles 4.30. Bethuel is the father of Rebekah.

**22.23-24 'And Bethuel begat Rebekah. These eight did Milcah bear to Nahor, Abraham's brother. And his concubine Reumah, she also bore Tebah and Gaham and Tahash and Maacah.'**

The four sons of Reumah are mentioned to bring the number of sons to twelve. It is constantly apparent that twelve is depicted as the ideal inter-tribal make up. Compare Ishmael -25.13-16 - and the twelve tribes of Israel. (The number of the tribes of Israel are maintained at twelve even though the constituents change).

Thus the family pedigree is carefully laid out in preparation for the account of the obtaining of a bride for Isaac. The family associations of Rebekah are made clear. Rebekah is the daughter of Bethuel, the son of Nahor who rules over an established tribal association.

In 29.5 Laban, Rebekah's brother, is called 'the son of Nahor'. But this is to connect him directly with the Patriarch of the tribal association. It was quite common for a man to be called 'the son of' his grandfather when that grandfather was very distinguished. In the same way Rebekah is later described as residing in 'the house of his master's (Abraham's) brother' (24.24). The continual stress is on Rebekah's relationship with Nahor. It must be made apparent that she is a suitable wife for Isaac.

**The Purchase of Land for a Possession Inclusive of a Burial Place (Genesis 23).**

This chapter was originally a tablet on its own. It is the record of the business transaction between Abraham and Ephron the Hittite and bears the marks of a typical Hittite contract. But as far as the compiler is concerned in it we learn of the first piece of the land which comes permanently into the possession of the family of Abraham. It is the firstfruits, the earnest (visible and tangible guarantee) of his inheritance. Thus Isaac's beginnings are founded in a solemn occasion, first ownership of the land.

So while it is at first sight the record of the closing of an era (the death of Sarah) it is actually the depiction of the beginning of a new era, the commencement of the possession of the land. 22.20-24 has begun the preparation for the new era, and this continues it. The emphasis of the compiler is on the fact that 'the field and the cave that is in it were made sure to Abraham for a possession of a buryingplace by the children of Heth' (23.20). It is a proof of permanence in the land.

Abraham has, of course, already buried many of his 'household' in the land and Sarah could

have been buried similarly. But this is the first time he has had to face up to the burial of his own close kin and she is a great lady. The previous burials were of strangers and sojourners in a land not their own. Abraham wants Sarah to be buried in her own land. Her burial therefore prepares the way for his own burial, and those of his descendants (49.30-32; 50.13), in the chosen land. It looks to the future. The 'possession of a buryingplace' is an indication of permanence. It is a new beginning.

**23.1 'And the life of Sarah was one hundred and twenty seven years. These were the years of the life of Sarah.'**

As mentioned of ages before, this age may not necessarily be intended literally (see on chapter 5). It is one of those ending in seven as with Ishmael (25.17) and Jacob (47.28). Otherwise dates connected with Abraham and his descendants tend to end in nought or five. But it does indicate a good age.

Ishmael and Jacob were distinctive in dying outside the land of promise. It may be that Sarah, as a woman, is also not seen as directly connected with the promise. But in the end, while recognising that numbers are symbolic, we must admit that we do not know conclusively what their final significance was. After all Joseph died outside the land at one hundred and ten.

**23.2 'And Sarah died in Kiriath Arba (the same is Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.'**

We are not told why Sarah happened to be in Hebron. It had previously been a place occupied by the family tribe and a sanctuary had been established there (13.18; 14.13; 18.1 with 23.19). She may well have been visiting connections there, possibly with the purpose of maintaining the old alliances.

'Came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.' The mourning rites associated with death were considered very important and paid mourners would often be employed (compare 50.10. See Jeremiah 9.17 on). The phrase thus refers to Abraham as coming to prepare for her funeral. We need not however doubt that it was an intensely personal moment for him.

'Kiriath Arba'. This was an earlier name for Hebron and means 'the city of four' or 'the city of Arba' (see Joshua 14.15). The Anakim Arba may have taken his name from the city. It is stressed that it is in the land of Canaan, the promised land.

**23.3-4 'And Abraham rose up from before his dead and spoke to the children of Heth, saying, "I am a stranger and a sojourner with you. Give me a possession of a burial place with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight".'**

Abraham seeks out the leadership of the people of the land at the city gate (v.10). There the leaders, who know his purpose, are gathered in their official function to consider his request.

This is a unique moment in Abraham's life. He seeks official ownership of part of the land of Canaan. He states clearly the situation. He is 'a stranger and sojourner'. He has no land rights. But now he seeks to become an official landowner holding the deeds of the property.

No one would have hindered him from burying Sarah. People were being buried all the time and its necessity was recognised. But this is something different. Abraham would cease being 'a stranger and a sojourner'. He wants 'a possession'. He would become a recognised inhabitant of the land with certain rights and responsibilities accruing. 23.5-6 'And the children of Heth answered Abraham, saying, "Hear us, my lord. You are a mighty prince among us. In the choice of our sepulchres bury your dead. None of us will withhold from you his sepulchre, but

**that you may bury your dead”.’**

**Their reply, while couched in polite oriental terms, gives consent to his suggestion. At a price they are willing to consider giving him ownership of a piece of land and thus altering his status in their eyes.**

**‘You are a mighty prince (literally ‘a prince of God’) among us.’ Recognition is given to the fact that Abraham is a man of means and of some power. They are prepared to deal with him as an equal and as having the status to be accepted. There may also be some recognition here of his prophetic status. The writer probably intends us to see it as signifying Abraham’s status before God.**

**The remaining flowery language is not to be taken literally. The last thing that they expect is that Abraham will make use of their own sepulchres. They are simply saying that they recognise that it is reasonable for him as ‘a mighty prince’ to want a sepulchre for burying important members of his own family.**

**23.7-9 ‘And Abraham rose up and bowed himself to the people of the land, even to the people of Heth, and he entered negotiations with them saying, “If it be your mind that I should bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and entreat for me to Ephron, the son of Zohar, that he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he owns, which is at the end of his field. Let him give it to me for the full price among you for the possession of a burial place”.’**

**Abraham already knows the land that he wants to buy and specifically describes it. In typical fashion he speaks of being ‘given’ the cave. Talking of buying and selling would have been frowned on. But he also makes clear that he expects to pay a fair price and none of them would have doubted it for a moment.**

**‘The full price.’ It has been claimed that this represents a Hittite technical term.**

**23.10-11 ‘Now Ephron was sitting among the children of Heth. And Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the children of Heth, even of all that went in at the gate of his city, saying, “No, my lord, hear me. I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. In the presence of the sons of my people I give it to you. Bury your dead ”.’**

**The conversation is taking place before the leading officials of the city. This is a public sale requiring the say so of the elders of the city, and especially so because it will alter Abraham’s status.**

**Ephron continues negotiation. He is willing, but if Abraham wants the cave he must also buy the field it is in. This would probably put him under certain feudal obligations. The ‘giving’ was not expected to be taken literally. They are in fact engaging in hard bargaining.**

**23.12-13 ‘And Abraham bowed himself down before the people of the land, and he spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, “But if you will, I pray you, hear me. I will give the price of the field. Take it of me and I will bury my dead there”.’**

**With full acknowledgement to the elders Abraham agrees to buy the field as well as the cave.**

**23.14-15 ‘And Ephron answered Abraham, saying to him, “My lord, hear me. A piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between me and you. Therefore bury your dead ”.’**

**Ephron seemingly offhandedly, but really in deadly earnest, names his price and it appears to**

be a stiff one. Omri will later buy the site of the whole city of Samaria for six thousand shekels (1 Kings 16.24). So either the field was very large or Ephron has his eyes on a big profit. He is well aware that Abraham is gaining more than a field.

'Four hundred shekels of silver.' Prices were paid by weight of silver and not by coinage which made its appearance much later.

23.16 'And Abraham listened to Ephron, and Abraham weighed for Ephron the silver which he had named in the hearing of the children of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current with the merchant.'

Abraham feels the price well worth paying. We have here a demonstration of how rich Abraham was. He could afford the price without argument.

23.17-18 'So the field of Ephron which was in Machpelah, which was before Mamre, the field and the cave which was in it, and all the trees that were in the field, that were in all the border of it round about, were made sure unto Abraham for a possession in the presence of the children of Heth, before all that went in at the gate of his city.'

This is the legal jargon by which the property transfer took place, outlining precisely what property was being sold together with its contents. Together with the stating of the price it is the centre of the covenant record. From now on the field and the cave are legally Abraham's together with the feudal responsibilities entailed. The children of Heth were solemn witnesses to the transaction, confirming its legality. The mention of trees in such a transaction is typical of Hittite contracts.

23.19-20 'And after this Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah before Mamre (the same is Hebron) in the land of Canaan. And the field and the cave that is in it were made sure to Abraham for a possession of a burial place by the children of Heth.'

The record summarises with satisfaction the successful conclusion of the transaction, stressing that Abraham now owns property in the land which will benefit future generations.

'The same is Hebron.' A typical scribal explanation added later to explain to later generations the whereabouts of the site mentioned.

It is possibly difficult to appreciate how much this must have meant to Abraham. His wife was not buried in a foreign land but in land which belonged to him which he held in possession (note how this was stressed). Now he and his descendants will possess the land, their own land, in death until the final promise of Yahweh is fulfilled.

#### Yahweh Arranges A Suitable Wife For Isaac (Genesis 24)

The covenant around which this record is based is found in verse 14, combined with the sacred oath of verse 3. Having been commissioned in the name of 'Yahweh the God of heaven and the God of the earth' the steward of Abraham puts the onus on Yahweh to act faithfully in providing a wife for Isaac. It is in fact made clear throughout that the record is of the activity of Yahweh in response to the requests of His servants. No one doubted that it was Yahweh Who set His seal on events and took charge of the whole operation, resulting in the coming of Rebekah to the chosen son. The record was made, not as interesting history, but as testimony to Yahweh's specific activity on Isaac's behalf. It is the guarantee that Yahweh's activity on behalf of Abraham is set to continue with his son. It is the seal on the covenant. It is divine history.

**It would seem probable that originally the account immediately followed 22.20-24, comprising one tablet, containing genealogy followed by ensuing history and revelation, with the covenant in chapter 23 neatly slotted in when the whole was brought together. The compilers purpose is to demonstrate that what seems like the end of an era, the death of Sarah and the reaching of extreme age of Abraham, is really the springboard to the advancement of the covenant promises. A portion of the land now actually belongs to the tribal leaders and Isaac is provided with a God appointed bride who is of the patriarchal line. As 24.67 makes clear she replaces Sarah as the tribal mother.**

**24.1 'And Abraham was old and well stricken in age, and Yahweh had blessed Abraham in all things.'**

**This is a brief summary of Abraham's life which is now coming to its end. It deliberately emphasises that the future is now with Isaac. The blessings were now to begin on him.**

**We would not gather from this that after the death of Sarah Abraham would remarry, would beget six sons, and would see them live to sufficient maturity to be sent away to live lives independently of the tribe (chapter 25). But that is only incidental to the main record and the maintaining of the covenant line. Before that is introduced the covenant succession must be made clear.**

**24.2 'And Abraham said to his servant, the elder of his house who ruled over all that he had, "Put, I pray you, your hand under my thigh, and I will make you swear by Yahweh, the God of heaven and the God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell, but you will go to my country and to my kindred and take a wife for my son Isaac".'**

**It was in the normal course of events that Abraham would arrange Isaac's marriage for it was the custom of the time. The vagueness of 24.1 as to time gives us no indication as to the precise timing but verse 67 suggests it was not too long after Sarah's death. There is a suggestion in Abraham's words that he is not sure whether he will still be alive by the time the servant returns. Sarah's death has aged him and he is aware of his mortality. He feels that death may be near and acts accordingly. However events would show that he had many years to live.**

**'The elder of his house who ruled over all that he had.'** This is no ordinary servant. He is a man of great prestige and position and the fact that he is sent demonstrates the importance Abraham places on the commission.

**'Put I pray your hand under my thigh.'** A recognised method of sealing an oath at the time (compare 47.29). It was clearly looked on as especially binding.

**'Swear by Yahweh the God of heaven and the God of earth.'** The phrase is all encompassing, referring to He Who created and Who possesses the heavens and the earth (compare 14.22 where a similar phrase is used in a most solemn covenant. Compare also 18.25 in a different context). It further reinforces the oath. This matter is under the direct eye of God. This is further emphasised in verses 7, 12, 27, 48 where He is 'Yahweh the God of Heaven' and 'Yahweh the God of my master Abraham'.

**The uniqueness of Abraham's faith as a believer in the One God Who made and possesses all things is rooted in the whole account of his life and especially in the covenant promises. Only the God of heaven and earth could have done such things and made such promises and it has brought home to Abraham the truth about Yahweh Whom he serves.**

**'That you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I**

dwel.' Abraham has a strong sense of family purity. His objection could not have been strictly religious, for Nahor is also probably not a worshipper of Yahweh (Joshua 24.2 compare Genesis 31.19). And a wife would be expected to conform, at least outwardly, to the religion of her husband. But it may well have contained an element of morality for the Canaanites had religious practises of a grossly sexual nature which could only be abhorrent to Abraham, and which he may well have spurned. Perhaps he recognised the danger of the insidious introduction of such practises (compare 35.2).

But in the end the maintenance of family purity is paramount. Compare how Abraham marries his half sister, Nahor marries his brother's daughter, and the continual insistence on marriage within the tribal connections, and indeed within the family. Compare also Isaac's grief at the marriage of Esau outside the family (26.35). This may well have arisen through Abraham's meditations on the ancient records which brought home to him that Yahweh was preserving a distinct line through which His promises would be fulfilled, which must be kept pure. This is confirmed by the fact that Abraham does not have the same concern about the marriages of his other sons borne to him by other wives.

'But will go to my country and to my kindred to take a wife for my son Isaac.' Abraham now looks on Haran as his country for it was there that he lived for many years, and he sees Ur as foreign to his present lifestyle. As noted above he is concerned that Isaac marries within the family.

24.5 'And the servant said to him, "Perhaps the woman will not be willing to follow me to this land. Does necessity demand that I bring your son again to the land from where you came?"'

The steward's point is well thought out. Which is more important, that Isaac stay in the land or that he marry a relative?

24.6-8 'And Abraham said to him, "You beware that you do not bring my son there again. Yahweh, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from my native land, and who spoke to me, and who swore to me saying, "I will give this land to your seed." He will send his angel before you and you will take a wife for my son from there. And if the woman is not willing to follow you then you will be free from this my oath. Only you shall not bring my son there again.'

Abraham's reply is unequivocal. Under no circumstances is Isaac to be take out of the land which God has given to him and his children, for he is there under the promise of Yahweh, the God of heaven. Indeed the reason they are there is because Yahweh has taken him away from all his past in order that he may receive this land. Yahweh's will comes before all else.

'From my father's house and from my native land.' The point is that he has left both home and country. His native land was Ur. His adopted land was Haran. But he has left both.

'He will send His angel before you.' Abraham is confident that 'the angel of Yahweh' Who has acted in the past, watching over the interests of his family (16.7 on; 21.17; 22.11), will not fail him now.

But whatever happens Isaac is to remain in the promised land. If the woman will not come then the servant may forget his oath for it will have been cancelled.

24.9 'And the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master and swore to him concerning this matter.'

The steward makes his solemn oath that he will do exactly as required. He will be in

Abraham's stead, will ensure that Isaac does not marry a Canaanite, will seek out a member of Abraham's family and if possible bring her to the promised land, but under no circumstances will allow Isaac to leave it.

**24.10** 'And the servant took ten camels of the camels of his master and departed, having all the goodly things of his master in his hand, and he arose and went to Aram Naharaim ('Aram of the two rivers' - Mesopotamia), to the city of Nahor.'

Camels were known in the area around this time but were the possessions of the very wealthy. This was therefore a deliberate attempt to impress those to whom he is going. It would be a rich caravan that went forth, loaded with valuables and well protected by armed guards.

'Ten camels.' This may be a round number to indicate a small group, but more than two or three.

'All the goodly things.' This may mean as many as he chose to take, or signify that he was steward over all having control over all and that he could take what he liked.

'The city of Nahor.' Probably not the name of the city which was probably Haran (11.31; 27.43). The point is that the steward went to the city where Nahor dwelt. Haran was situated on the river Balikh, a tributary of the Upper Euphrates and was a centre of moon worship.

**24.11-14** 'And he made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water at eventide, the time when the women go out to draw water. And he said, "Oh Yahweh, the God of my master Abraham, send me I pray you good speed this day, and show kindness to my master Abraham. Look, I am standing by the spring of water, and the daughters of the men of the city come out to draw water. And let it come to pass that the young woman to whom I will say, "Let down your pitcher, I beg you, that I may drink", and she shall say, "Drink, and I will give your camels drink as well", let the same be she whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac. And by that will I know that you have shown kindness to my master.'

These all important words form the basis of the covenant that the steward makes with Yahweh and around which the account is based. Yahweh is Abraham's covenant God and the steward charges him reverently to act now to ensure the covenant succession. The terms by which he will understand Yahweh's response are clearly outlined.

This example is not one generally to follow. This was not just seeking guidance about some mundane matter but seeking to establish something at the very heart of God's covenant. It is not something to be applied to our everyday lives. 'Show kindness (covenant faithfulness) to my master Abraham.' Again a reverent but solemn charge that God will act towards Abraham in accordance with His covenant promises. The word for 'kindness' is *chesed*, 'covenant faithfulness and love'.

The test is then outlined. He will stand by the well with his camels and ask for a drink from the women who come to the well. The one who offers to give drink to his camels as well will be the one chosen by Yahweh. That will be proof of God's covenant love and faithfulness shown to Abraham.

It has been well pointed out that the test would reveal a woman who was courteous and compassionate, kind both to her fellowmen and to animals. But the matter does not stop there. The steward has been sent to Abraham's kinsfolk (24.4). He thus expects God to ensure that the woman fits the requirements (see verses 21-27). We can be sure that God has pressed on his heart this method of approach for otherwise it would not be justified. This is a genuine revelation from God.



**24.15 'And it happened that before he had done speaking, behold, Rebekah came out, who was born to Bethuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, with her pitcher on her shoulder.'**

**There is an immediate response. Out to the well comes Rebekah a kinswoman of Abraham. The family details refer back to the opening genealogy (22.23). It is quite clear that Yahweh has accepted the terms of the covenant and has responded.**

**'With her pitcher on her shoulder.' Important woman though she is she is not too important to partake in the vital task of providing water.**

**24.16 'And the young woman was very fair to look at, a virgin, nor had any man known her. And she went down to the spring and filled her pitcher, and came back up. And the servant ran to meet her and said, "Give me to drink, I beg you, a little water from your pitcher."'**

**The family of Terah appears to have produced beauties, although the description may have been partly polite.**

**'A virgin, nor had any man known her.' The description is interesting. The qualification seen as necessary suggests that the term for 'virgin' (bethulah) did not necessarily mean the same as we would mean today. Clearly a woman could be a bethulah and yet have had sexual experience. It means therefore a well behaved young woman of an age for sexual activity without any comment about her sexual experience or status. Thus the writer qualifies the word to exclude that as well. (In Leviticus 21.14 it excludes widows and divorcees and sacred prostitutes).**

**The steward moves quickly to intercept her as she come up from the spring and asks for a drink. But in his heart is an anticipatory excitement as he waits for how the woman will respond.**

**24.18-20 'And she said, "Drink, sir." And she hastily let down her pitcher on her hand and gave him a drink. And when she had finished giving him a drink she said, "I will also draw for your camels until they have had enough to drink." And she quickly emptied her pitcher into the trough and ran again to the well to draw, and drew for all his camels.'**

**The well is clearly a large, deep hole in the ground with steps leading down to the spring. It is also clear that there was a trough by the well for the feeding of animals, and without hesitation Rebekah fulfils the steward's requirements in accordance with the covenant he had made with Yahweh. Ten camels would take a lot of satisfying which is a testimony to the goodness of her heart. However she was also no doubt impressed with his rich appearance.**

**24.21 'And the man watched her intently, saying nothing, in order to discover whether Yahweh had prospered his journey or not.'**

**Rebekah was aware of the man watching her intently but knew nothing of what was in his heart. But Abraham's steward knew a mounting excitement as she carried out her ministrations. This was one of the great moments in his life. Never had he experienced contact with Yahweh in this way. He had made his firm covenant with God and now he was watching it unfold before his eyes.**

**'Whether Yahweh had prospered his journey or not.' This was no truism. He had made a firm covenant with Yahweh and was concerned to see whether it would be truly fulfilled (see also verses 40, 42, 56). This phrase is central to the passage. Has the covenant been fulfilled?**

**24.22-25 'And it happened that, as soon as the camels had finished drinking, the man took a golden ring weighing a beka (half a shekel - see Exodus 38.26), and two golden bracelets for her for her arms of ten shekels weight of gold, and said, "Whose daughter are you? Tell me, I pray you. Is there room in your father's house for me to lodge in?" And she said to him, "I am the daughter of Bethuel, the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor." And she also said to him, "We have both straw and provender enough, and room to lodge in."**

We do not know at what stage in the conversation he gave her the jewellery, possibly after he had learned who she was, But he was now satisfied that Yahweh had brought to him the woman of His choice and makes moves to receive hospitality in her father's house. She would almost certainly realise that something special was afoot by the nature of the gifts, although it is possible she saw the valuable gifts as intended to ensure a welcome. But these heavy gold pieces are not the kind to be given lightly.

Golden earrings about a shekel in weight have been discovered at Ur. Thus the golden ring may have been for the ear. Alternatively it could be a nose ring or some other piece of jewellery. Verse 47 might suggest it was a nose ring.

Her description of herself was spoken proudly, connecting herself through her father with Nahor whom she clearly considers a man of some substance. She wants the man to know that she is no ordinary woman and that her family are well able to make provision for any number of camels.

**24.26-27 'And the man bowed his head and worshipped Yahweh. And he said, "Blessed be Yahweh, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his mercy and his truth towards my master. As for me, Yahweh has led me in the way to the house of my master's brethren".'**

The words convey the depth of the man's feelings as he recognises the fulfilling of God's covenant with him (see verse 12). Primary is the fact that Yahweh has been faithful and true to Abraham in accordance with their covenant relationship. But more overwhelming to him is the fact that Yahweh has wonderfully led and guided him to the very people he was seeking without any effort on his part. He cannot doubt, as cannot the readers, that he has watched the unfolding of the covenant he himself had made with Yahweh.

The words are deliberately spoken in the presence of the young woman. He wants her to know that his mission is directed by Yahweh and that she is involved.

**24.28 'And the young woman ran and told her mother's house according to these words.'**

Aware that something out of the ordinary is taking place Rebekah races home to lay the position before her mother. She describes in detail the words of the steward so that their significance might be considered.

'Her mother's house.' This is the women's quarters. It is her mother's prerogative to take charge of the situation and present it to the family.

The position would now be laid before Bethuel and the family. It is clear from what follows that Bethuel is somewhat indisposed, probably through illness or disability, for otherwise it would be he who led the way to welcome the stranger. Thus the responsibility is taken by his son Laban, who is Rebekah's brother.

**24.29-30 'And Rebekah had a brother and his name was Laban. And Laban ran out to the man, to the spring. And it happened that when he saw the ring, and the bracelets on his sister's**

arms, and when he heard the words of his sister Rebekah, saying “This was what the man said to me”, that he came to the man, and behold he stood by the camels at the spring.’

The repetitiveness of this sentence is typical of Near Eastern literature. Laban examines the expensive jewellery and listens to what Rebekah tells him, recognising deep significance in the man’s words. He knows that this is far more than a man seeking shelter and hospitality. Thus he goes to meet the man on his sister’s behalf, to find out what is happening.

‘And behold he stood by the camels at the spring.’ The camels are constantly being emphasised. Only a wealthy man possessed camels in those days and the presence of a group of camels demonstrates how important this mission is. It also of course demonstrates the magnificence of the caravan that Laban will discover. This is no ordinary trading venture.

24.31 ‘And he said, “Come in, you blessed of Yahweh, why do you stand outside? I have prepared the house and room for the camels.”

Laban greets him on his own terms making clear that he is aware of all that has been said, and invites him to accept the hospitality of his family. He is making clear that they are responsive to his approach.

‘You blessed of Yahweh.’ With typical Near Eastern hospitality he refers to the man’s description of himself as one who is on a mission for Yahweh. This does not mean that Laban is a worshipper of Yahweh. But he no doubt recognises the name of Abraham’s God.

24.32-33a ‘And the man came into the house and he unloaded the camels, removing their trappings, and he provided straw and provender for the camels and water for the man to wash his feet, and the men’s feet who were with him. And food was set before him to eat.’

The ‘he’ is Laban, but the work would mainly be done by servants under his supervision. Full hospitality is provided. First the valuable camels must be seen to. This would be the visitor’s first requisite. Then he is provided with water with which to wash his feet, a prime requirement in a hot and dusty country, especially as the man was probably wearing sandals.

While it would have been assumed by everybody, this is the first mention of men accompanying the steward. This again brings out the importance of the camels and their significance, which have been constantly mentioned. (It also warns against reading into silences in ancient narratives).

Then once the necessary preliminaries have been complied with, and the men have been made comfortable, a meal is set before them. But notice how the attention is drawn specifically to the welcome given to the man himself. ‘He’ came into the house. A meal is set before ‘him’. His acceptance is being stressed. Up to this point nothing has been said about the man’s purpose in being here although there would no doubt be great anticipation. With true Near Eastern courtesy that would await his being well fed.

24.33b ‘But he said, “I will not eat until I have told you my errand.” And he said, “Speak on”.’

It would be normal for a visitor to eat first and then for his purpose in visiting to be introduced into the conversation. Thus these words would be attention catching. They suggest also that the man feels that he has a sacred duty to Yahweh not to eat until his side in the mission is completed. His hearers would no doubt read into them the sacredness of his mission. They are already aware that he feels he is on a mission for Yahweh.

The steward now lays out the terms and details of his commission, making clear in the

meanwhile the splendid prospects of the intended bridegroom. The speech is long and flowery outlining the details of the mission in full. This would be in accordance with expectations. Such a speech revealed that the steward was cultivated and well taught, and would enhance his master's reputation. It was also designed to impress and to make his hearers aware that this was no ordinary matter and no ordinary marriage request. This was at the instigation of Yahweh.

**24.34-36** 'And he said, "I am Abraham's servant. And Yahweh has blessed my master greatly and he has become great. And he has given him flocks and herds and silver and gold, and menservants and maidservants, and camels and asses. And Sarah, my master's wife, bore a son to my master when she was old. And to him he has given all that he has".'

The worthiness of the bridegroom is described. He is the son of Abraham and Sarah, both of whom were related to Nahor and were well known to them. Moreover the wealth and success of Abraham is made clear and the fact that Isaac is his main heir. He is thus a worthy husband for such as Rebekah.

**24.37-38** 'And my master made me swear saying, "You will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites in whose land I dwell, but you will go to my father's house, and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son".'

The steward now makes clear he is acting under oath, and the content of the oath. His words would bring approving nods from the hearers. They too recognise the importance of marriage within the family. Notice that Abraham speaks of 'my father's house'. It is of course now the house of Nahor but Abraham is stressing through his steward that they and he are one household. They are all of the family of Terah. While he may have separated from them, the ties of blood hold firm. Thus he wishes his son to marry within the family.

**24.39** 'And I said to my master, "It may be that the woman will not follow me."

The steward now delicately makes clear that they recognise that the woman and her family have a free choice. They are not making demands but seeking a favour. When Abraham exacted the oath he would recognise that his stipulations would be used in the bargaining that would result.

**24.40-41** 'And he said to me, "Yahweh before whom I walk will send his angel with you and prosper your way, and you will take a wife for my son from my kindred and of my father's house. Then you will be clear of your oath when you come to my kindred. And if they do not give her to you, you will be clear of my oath".'

The sacredness of his mission is now described. It is Yahweh Himself Who has accompanied him for the purpose of obtaining a bride of suitable parentage. But he quickly and courteously assures them that this does not put them under necessary obligation, although that is in fact his intention.

We note that the servant discreetly does not mention the fact that Abraham does not want his son to come to Haran. But the absence of Isaac from the caravan makes this apparent.

**24.42-48** 'And I came this day to the spring, and said, "Oh Yahweh, God of my master Abraham, if now you prosper my way that I go, see, I am standing by the spring of water. And let it be that the young woman who comes forth to draw, to whom I will say 'Give me, I pray, a little water from your pitcher to drink', and she shall say to me, 'Both you drink and I will also draw for your camels', let the same be the woman whom Yahweh has appointed for my master's son. And before I had finished speaking in my heart, behold Rebekah came out with

her pitcher on her shoulder. And she went down to the spring and drew, and I said to her, 'Let me drink, I pray you'. And she quickly brought her pitcher down from her shoulder and said, 'Drink, and I will also give your camels drink'. So I drank, and she made the camels drink as well. And I asked her, 'Whose daughter are you?' And she said, 'The daughter of Bethuel, son of Nahor, whom Milcah bore to him. And I put the ring on her nose and the bracelets on her arms, and I bowed my head and worshipped Yahweh, and blessed Yahweh, the God of my master Abraham, who has led me in the right way to take my master's brother's daughter for his son'.'

The passage must be read as one whole. This is his unrejectable argument as to why Rebekah should be given to Isaac. It begins and ends with reference to 'Yahweh, the God of my master Abraham'. The work is His doing and to go against it would be to go against Him. It is His work from start to finish. The specific connection to Abraham indicates that he does not expect them to acknowledge Yahweh as their God. But he does expect them to honour His revealed power and authority.

He expects them also to see in what has happened a truly divine hand. What other explanation can there be? For outwardly it could have been any woman who came to the spring, and they must surely see that the fact that it was the one woman whom the steward was seeking could only be attributed to the direct action of Yahweh.

That he had fully recognised this comes out in the fact that he gave the valuable gifts to Rebekah and his openly expressed gratitude to Yahweh. He now calls on his hearers to grant the same recognition.

'If You prosper my way' (verse 42). Everything is in Yahweh's hands. He possibly expects his readers to realise the covenant that he made with Yahweh. Thus 'the right way' (verse 48) is the way brought about by Yahweh.

24.49 "And now if you will deal truly and with kindness with my master, tell me. And if not, tell me, that I may turn to the right hand or to the left."

He now asks for their response. Are they favourably disposed, or not? If not he will he will turn aside and leave them.

'Turn to the right hand or to the left.' This indicates that up to this point he has had one purpose in mind, he has looked neither left nor right. Now he has reached the end of his mission. If it is unsuccessful that will be that. There is no way forward and he will therefore no longer pursue it. (For the phrase contrast Numbers 20.17; Deuteronomy 5.32). For the phrase 'deal kindly and truly' see 47.29. It is a request for genuine and honest commitment.

24.50 'Then Laban and Bethuel answered and said, "The thing proceeds from Yahweh. We cannot speak to you good or bad."

This is the decisive turning point. The decision is made. Laban acknowledges that Yahweh has clearly taken control and that he cannot therefore go against Him. The steward has put his case well. The writer wants us to know that even those who do not worship Yahweh have to admit His power. But there can be no doubt that they are also swayed by awareness of who Abraham is and his evident wealth.

'We cannot speak to you good or bad.' In this context this means 'cannot say anything'. Sometimes however it specifically refers to a moral decision.

The mention of Laban first, when we would have expected Bethuel, is interesting. It is quite

clear that he is heading proceedings. This suggests that Bethuel was in no condition to do so. He is included in the response out of courtesy and because the decision is officially his as head of the house, but he is clearly in no position to make it. It presumably indicates that he was suffering from some debilitating illness, possibly being in a near vegetative state.

**24.51** “See, Rebekah is before you. Take her and go, and let her be your master’s son’s wife as Yahweh has spoken.”

The steward receives what he had asked for, permission to take Rebekah back to his master to marry Isaac.

**24.52-53** ‘And it happened that when Abraham’s servant heard their words he bowed himself to the earth to Yahweh. And the servant brought forth jewels of silver and jewels of gold and clothes and gave them to Rebekah. He also gave precious things to her brother and to her mother.’

When the steward receives this response he can only offer his gratitude to Yahweh. Rebekah is then loaded with presents which will benefit her as a wife to Isaac.

The giving of ‘brotherhood gifts’ in such circumstances is known also from documents at Nuzi. It would seem that a brother was to be compensated for the loss of a sister. But here it is probably rather as the head of the family that Laban receives gifts on behalf of his father. The non-mention of Bethuel confirms the background position he has in the account.

**24.54** ‘And he and the men who were with him ate and drank and remained all night, and in the morning they rose up and he said, “Send me away to my master”.’

Now that his mission is accomplished the steward accepts the hospitality of the house. He and his men are well entertained and finally go to rest. But the steward is aware that his master is eagerly awaiting word and next day insists that he must return immediately. Had Abraham himself come such haste would have been considered unseemly, but coming from a servant it was acceptable.

**24.55** ‘And her brother and her mother said, “Let the young woman remain with us for some days, or ten. After that she shall go”.’

To just have accepted the steward’s haste would have been impolite, and there was a natural reluctance on the part of Laban and his mother to lose their sister and daughter so quickly. After all, up to the previous day there had been no thought of her going. So they suggest a short period prior to their departure, but assure him that this does not imply reluctance on their part.

‘For days or ten’ (literally). This probably signifies ‘for two or three days or even ten days’.

**24.56** ‘And he said to them. Do not hold me back seeing that Yahweh has prospered my way. Send me away that I may go to my master.’

The steward does not want to be delayed and uses as grounds for his quick departure the fact that he has been on a mission determined by Yahweh. The implication may be that his return is also as a result of Yahweh’s instigation.

**24.57-58** ‘And they said, “We will call the young woman and ask what she has to say.” And they called Rebekah and said to her, “Will you go with this man?” And she said, “I will go”.’

The first acceptance of the proposal was by Laban and Bethuel as practising and nominal heads of the family. The detailing of arrangements was dealt with by Laban and Rebekah's mother. But in the end Rebekah has a say. Accepting it at face value this means that she has final refusal, but they would only expect this if she was totally opposed to the idea. The general view would be that she should fall in line with their wishes. It would surprise no one when she agreed.

**24.59-60** 'And they sent away Rebekah their sister, and nurse (called Deborah, see 35.8), and Abraham's servant and his men. And they blessed Rebekah and said to her, "Our sister, may you be the mother of thousands of ten thousands and may your seed possess the gate of those who hate them."'

They can now agree to the quick departure and make preparations for them to leave. Rebekah, as a daughter of the tribal head is accompanied by a mature female attendant to watch over her ( a 'nurse' who would have had responsibility for her upbringing) and a number of young women to attend her. She had had the freedom to collect water from the spring but she was still a woman of some importance.

Their blessing, an important part of the procedure which demonstrated that she was leaving with their approval, is interesting. Their concern is that she may have a position of female authority over a goodly sized army which is successful against its enemies. To 'possess the gate', which was where the elders of a town ruled, was to have power and control. They are probably aware of something of Abraham's set up and will have gleaned more from the steward. Their aim is not necessarily belligerent but a concern for her continued safety and prosperity which they recognise is dependent, among other things, on armed force. Abraham would not have remained wealthy long without his private army.

**24.61** 'And Rebekah arose, and her young women, and they rode on the camels and followed the man. And the servant took Rebekah and went his way.'

Now we realise why the steward had taken so many camels. He had known full well that if he was successful they would be required for this purpose. Thus they leave her home and family and make their way back to Canaan.

**24.62** 'And Isaac came from the way of Beer-lahai-roi, for he dwelt in the land of the South. And Isaac went out to contemplate in the open country at eventide, and he lifted up his eyes, and behold there were camels coming.'

The end of the story is foreshortened. No mention is made of the return to Abraham which may well have taken place before this incident, for Isaac is well south of Beersheba in 'the land of the South', almost at the Egyptian border. What is clearly important to the writer, who undoubtedly also has a romantic streak, is the satisfactory union of Isaac and Rebekah. All attention is on Isaac who is the new beginning and Abraham slips into the background. The account begins with the ancient Abraham and ends with the two young lives who represent the future. Thus it is the place where they will dwell in the not too distant future which is the centre of attention.

Isaac clearly has a liking for Beer-lahai-roi for after his father's death he goes there to live. It is the place where the pregnant Hagar met the angel of Yahweh when she had deserted the tribe to return to Egypt. Its meaning is probably 'the well of the living one who sees me', or 'the well of he who sees me lives'. It is quite possible that he went there to meet up with his brother Ishmael, and was there on a visit at this time. (They seem on good terms in 25.9).

'Went out to contemplate in the open country at eventide.' The meaning of the verb is pure

guesswork for it occurs nowhere else. But Isaac is a much quieter soul than the vigorous Abraham and contemplation would probably suit his character, as is suggested by his predilection for this comparatively lonely oasis away from the hub of civilisation.

**'And he lifted up his eyes -- and there were camels coming.'** There can be no doubt of the writer's romantic streak. Isaac lifts up his eyes, and Rebekah lifts up her eyes. And in a sense they meet. The writer is hinting that the sight of the camels, fairly rare and therefore quite probably carrying the expected bride, must have stirred something within him.

**24.64-65 'And Rebekah lifted up her eyes and when she saw Isaac she alighted from the camel. And she said to the servant, "What man is that who walks in the open country to meet us?" And the servant said, "It is my master." And she took her veil and covered herself.'**

Rebekah too has an instant response. Something tells her that this man she can see walking in the open country is her future husband and she slips from her camel. Then she seeks confirmation from the steward, who replies "It is my master."

Some have cavilled at this statement on the grounds that Abraham is his master, but it has always been commonplace for the son of the house to be thought of as 'the young master'. There is a delicacy of touch in his slightly exaggerating Isaac's status in the eyes of the future wife. He wishes Rebekah to know that he will be as faithful to her future husband as he is to her future father-in-law.

**'And she took her veil and covered herself.'** She has been travelling unveiled but now modesty requires that she veil herself to meet her betrothed, for this is a formal meeting and she does not wish to appear forward.

**24.66 'And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done.'**

It was natural that the steward would outline to Isaac everything that had happened, but the writer is trying also to show that Isaac is now taking over Abraham's mantle. He can now be seen as 'the master' and receive briefing from the steward. The old is passing and the new is here.

**24.67 'And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rebekah and she became his wife. And he loved her, and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.'**

This is a general statement rather than referring to the action of the moment. Rebekah takes the place of his mother as mother of the tribe. Whether she actually used Sarah's tent is really irrelevant although it is very likely. The point is rather the status and position she receives.

**'And he loved her.'** While Abraham almost certainly loved Sarah it is never stated. This statement therefore is a further indication of the writer's romantic viewpoint. It may also indicate that Isaac was seen as being of a more tender nature than his father. He fell short of his father's robustness but he had a delicacy of spirit that his father lacked.

**'Was comforted after his mother's death.'** This also brings out his delicacy of spirit. He missed his mother and found solace in the arms of Rebekah. Again this is something we would not expect to find said of Abraham. The forceful Abraham is replaced by the gentle Isaac. ('Death' is understood and is not part of the Hebrew text. The point is that he missed her).

This totally different presentation of the character of Isaac confirms the earliness of the record. There is here the eyewitness appreciation of the difference between father and son without the contrast being specifically drawn.



## **The Further Marriage and Death of Abraham and the Succession (Genesis 25).**

Having introduced the changeover from Abraham to Isaac the compiler now deals with sundry matters relating to the final days of Abraham and the succession before going on with the main story. He clearly has here tablets which contain information which he wants to preserve and reveals that he is concerned here, not only with Isaac but also with the subsidiary fulfilment of God's promises with regard to Ishmael.

### **The Death of Abraham and His Dispositions (25.1-12a)**

The first tablet contains Abraham's final disposition of his estate (25.1-12). This is described as 'the family history of Ishmael, the son of Abraham, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's maid bore to Abraham' (25.12) and would be maintained by him as the new senior member of the family. In the nature of what he was it is brief and only contains essential detail. (This may be the heading of the following tablet, but that is more probably described as 'the family history of Isaac, the son of Abraham' (25.19a).

It begins with Abraham's remarriage and further children, and briefly describes his administration of his estate and death and burial. It suggests a happy state of affairs between Ishmael and Isaac.

**25.1-4 'And Abraham took another wife and her name was Keturah. And she bore him Zimran and Jokshan, and Medan and Midian, and Ishbak and Shuah. And Jokshan begat Sheba and Dedan. And the sons of Dedan were Asshurim, and Letushim, and Leummim. And the sons of Midian, Ephah and Epher, and Hanoah and Abidah, and Eldaah. All these were the children of Keturah.'**

We are not told whether Abraham took Keturah to wife before or after the death of Sarah but the fact that she is called a concubine (verse 6) may suggest the former. By a concubine is meant a slave wife, one who is not considered of sufficient standing to be a full wife. But he may also have taken her as a comfort after the death of Sarah. However, she clearly does not obtain full status. That is passed on to Rebekah.

Contrary to his fears (17.17) he proves fruitful. He was not the last man of years to surprise himself. And this fruitfulness eventually results in twelve 'children' (compare for this 22.20-24 and 25.13-15 and the twelve children of Israel).

In the simplest scenario some of these are named after neighbouring tribes and those with whom he had trading relationships.

But the picture may well be more complicated than this. These may be intended also to represent twelve sub-tribes. Twelve 'tribes' may well have been looked on in the larger family (and possibly in wider circles) as denoting a twelve tribe grouping, thus a complete tribal grouping.

We must not just look on this tablet as a postscript. It is, of course, in the compilation a postscript to the main story but to its author it would have seemed an important part of the record of Abraham's life. The bearing of sons was something of which the ancients were proud and it demonstrated Abraham's life and vigour even in his later years. It was something of which a loyal son could be proud.

The names in the genealogy also refer us to the regions of Southern Palestine and North West Arabia. As noted earlier tribal groups would arise by birth, inter-marriage, amalgamation and accumulation and this genealogy might suggest that Abraham's sons had important leadership

roles in these tribes (compare 25.16). We especially note that the 'sons' of Dedan, whose names are plural in form, were, as the forms suggest, probably sub-tribes. And Dedan is a well known tribal grouping in Arabia, as is Sheba. Comparison should be made with Genesis 10.

We thus find here the possible connection of sons of Abraham with Midianites, Medanites (both closely associated elsewhere with Ishmaelites - Genesis 37.28 with 36; Judges 8.24 ), Sabaeans (from Sheba) and Dedanites among others. The result would be that through his sons his influence has become wide and effective. As we have seen earlier (on chapter 14) he was an effective fighter, and he has passed these skills on to his sons making them welcome anywhere.

In Genesis 10 a Sheba and Dedan descend from Raamah, through Cush, son of Ham, clearly representing Arabian connections via North Africa. It is quite possibly with these that Abraham's sons connect in 'the land of the East'. In 10.28 a Sheba (Havilah is also connected with both) is descended from Joktan who is connected with Eber, who is the forefather of Abraham. The inter-relationship of these tribes is clearly complicated. Names are not, of course, necessarily proof of direct connection but the mention of Midian, Medan, Sheba and Dedan, well known in later Biblical records, would seem more than a coincidence, especially as connected with Ishmael and the fact that they are specifically said to have moved to the land of the East.

**25.5a 'And Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac.'**

This is his 'last will and testament', made while he is still alive, and confirms Isaac as sole heir over the family tribe and its wealth.

**25.6 'But to the sons of the concubines whom Abraham had, Abraham gave gifts. And he sent them away from Isaac his son, while he yet lived, eastward to the east country.'**

Abraham deals fairly with all his sons and provides generously for them. But he wisely ensures the succession of Isaac without trouble by ensuring that they establish themselves elsewhere. While he is still alive he sends them away eastward (from Beersheba) 'to the East country'.

**25.7-8 'And these are the days of the years of Abraham's life which he lived, a hundred and seventy five years. And Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people.'**

The one hundred and seventy five years is made up of seventy five years prior to his arrival in Canaan (see on 12.4) and one hundred years in the land. Both are probably symbolic round numbers denoting a goodly time and suggesting a completeness in each sphere of his life. (See on chapter 5 and 12.4). To live a long life was seen as evidence of a man's worthiness and Abraham was clearly worthy.

'And was gathered to his people.' Simply denoting burial. He went the way of all his family to the shadowy world of the grave. No clear teaching on an afterlife is evident in the patriarchal history, nor in Israel's early history. They concentrated on God's purposes in this world and left the future in God's hands. This may well have been a reaction to the ideas in religions round about them which they rejected.

**25.9-10 'And Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, which is before Mamre, the field which Abraham purchased from the children of Heth. There was Abraham buried, and Sarah his wife.'**

Isaac and Ishmael come together to bury their father. This suggests that they kept in close contact, for burials could not be delayed in a hot country. The general impression from hints in

the narratives is that their relationship was friendly.

Stress is laid on the fact that Abraham is buried in what was his own territory. Possession of the land had begun. The basic facts in the account in chapter 23 were clearly familiar to the author.

**25.11 'And it happened after the death of Abraham that God blessed Isaac his son, and Isaac dwelt by Beer-lahai-roi.'**

This brief sentence speaks volumes. It demonstrates that Isaac prospered under God's hand. It also shows that he went with his family tribe to live within easy contact of Ishmael (see on 24.62). The use of 'God' instead of 'Yahweh' may reflect Ishmael's hand.

**25.12 'This is the family history of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's handmaid, bore to Abraham.'**

This give us good reason to believe that this record was made by Ishmael as the senior male in the family, and that this is the colophon to the tablet (see [Colophons](#)). We have already had cause to suggest record keeping by Ishmael (see on 21.1-21). It would serve to reinforce his good relationship with Isaac and accurately depicts the inheritance position and the influence of the wider family. That Ishmael had close connection with the sons of Keturah comes out later in that Midianites and Medanites can be referred to as Ishmaelites (Judges 8.24; Genesis 37.27-28 with 36).

The main early record in Genesis was clearly put together from ancient 'covenant' tablets, and traces of colophons are found throughout. Certain material was necessarily added by the original compiler to connect them and it is clearly not always possible to determine what was his work and what was in the original tablets, and what was omitted to ensure a reasonably smooth flow of the narrative. But perusal of the record does suggest that on the whole the records were incorporated as they were with connecting links but with little alteration. (Alternately this phrase may be seen as the colophon to the following tablet).

**The Death of Ishmael (25.13-19.a).**

This section ends with 'this is the family history of Isaac' (25.191), and its purpose is to record the death of Ishmael and outline his connections and the twelve sub-tribes that came from him. It is only the second record (the first was 11.10b-27a) not to be connected to a covenant and like that passage demonstrates descent, which would be seen as sufficient reason for its preservation.

**25.13a 'And these are the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, according to their family histories.'**

The purpose of the narrative is to record Ishmael's descendants and their tribal connections.

**25.13b 'The firstborn of Ishmael, Nebaioth, and Kedar, and Abdeel, and Mibsam, and Mishma, and Dumah, and Massa. Hadad and Tema, Jetur, Naphish and Kedemah. These are the sons of Ishmael, and these are their names by their villages and by their encampments, twelve princes according to their nations.'**

It is immediately clear that the twelve tribe grouping here is much more closely connected than that of the sons of Keturah and appears to be on a similar basis to the twelve tribes of Israel. Each son is 'prince' of his sub-tribe. This title 'prince' (nasi' (plural nesi'im) is that used also of the tribal leaders of Israel (Exodus 22.27; Numbers 1.16, 44; 7.2-84; 34.18-28; compare

**10.14-26; 13.4-15), each the head of his tribe on the amphictyonic council.**

**An amphictyony is an inter-tribal grouping of associated tribes for common welfare, often united around a central sanctuary. This would appear to be the pattern of the Ishmaelite tribes, although whether they had a central sanctuary we do not know.**

**Esau married the sister of Nebaioth (Genesis 28.9). The rams of Nebaioth are mentioned in Isaiah 60.7 along with the flocks of Kedar, and both tribes are named together in Assyrian inscriptions. Kedar are also seen as the guardians of the land route from Palestine to Egypt by the Persians.**

**Kedar and Tema are connected in Arabia in Isaiah 21.13-17, where Tema brought food and water to travelling Dedanites. Tema and Dedan are mentioned together in Jeremiah 25.23, and the caravans of Tema are mentioned along with Sheba in Job 6.19. Massa may be mentioned with Tema (as Mas'a) as paying tribute to Tiglath Pileser III.**

**Thus we have confirmation of long term interrelationship between Ishmaelites and the sons of Keturah, and of their close connection with Arabia and the desert.**

**25.17 'And these are the years of the life of Ishmael, a hundred and thirty seven year. And he breathed his last and died and was gathered to his people. And they dwelt from Havilah to Shur, which is before Egypt as you go towards Assyria. And he fell in the presence of (or in front of ) all his brothers.'**

**Like Sarah, a woman, and Jacob who died outside the land of promise, Ishmael's age ends in seven. He too died outside the land of promise. The significance of this numbering now escapes us, but he was clearly of good age.**

**Like Abraham he 'breathed his last' and was 'gathered to his people'. He died and was buried and went into the grave where his ancestors were.**

**'They dwelt from Havilah (probably in North West Arabia) to Shur.' Desert tribes, ever on the move, they inhabited the very extensive desert land south of Canaan and in North West Arabia, possibly with connections with Southern Arabia. Havilah is connected with the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15.7) and is elsewhere connected with Northern and Southern Arabia (see Genesis 10.7, 29) but it simply mean 'district' and may therefore refer to a number of places. This would confirm Ishmael's close connections with the sons of Keturah. Shur is on the direct road to Egypt from Southern Palestine (1 Samuel 15.7; 27.8 compare Genesis 16.7).**

**'And he fell in the presence of all his brothers.' This possibly refers to his death in warfare, or while engaging in some other activity with his brothers, but certainly indicates further his close association with his brothers. If Isaac was now also on good terms with his brother we can see why he moved his own family tribe to an area where he had contact with him and did not fear the bedouin tribes in the desert.**

**25.19a 'This is the family history of Isaac, Abraham's son.' On the death of Ishmael Isaac becomes the eldest son of Abraham and accordingly takes responsibility for the family records and the recording of Ishmael's death.**

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