

**ABRAHAM, SARAH, ISAAC
HAGAR, ISHMAEL
GENESIS 11:27 - 25:18**

Introduction to Genesis 12-25

In the myths of the Ancient Near East, the story of the beginnings leads directly to the establishment of the monarchy. Their purpose was to provide a stable and divine foundation for the king's reign, supported by the cult. As we have already noted, the stories of the beginnings in Genesis do not take the form of myth. Their purpose is different. The primeval narrative in Genesis does not reach a climax with king and cult. It introduces the patriarchs, the ancient ancestors of the people of Israel. The authors draw on stories handed down through the generations and re-tell them in terms that address the interests and concerns of their contemporaries.

Just as Christians read the Old Testament in the light of Jesus' revelation, so the people of Israel read these patriarchal stories in the light of the revelation given to Moses. They were a kind of 'Old Testament' for them in which they expected to find material that was a preparation for, but not always consistent with, their own religious practices as spelt out in the other books of the Torah. This is particularly noticeable in the way God and God's relationship to human beings are portrayed in the patriarchal narratives. There is no sense of religious antagonism. Other nations are not rejected because they worship false gods. Everyone is assumed to be relating to the one God. This is true of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, but it is also true of Abimelech, a Canaanite king, and the Pharaoh of Egypt. Furthermore, God relates to people directly, without the mediation of priests or prophets. Cult is simple family cult, quite different from that prescribed in Mosaic Yahwism.

The covenant with Noah is a covenant with the whole human race. The covenant with Abraham concerns a particular choice for a particular relationship with God to carry out a particular mission. It assumes justice (for all). It focuses on love (God's special choice).

It is essential from the beginning to know that God's choice of Abraham in no way involves a rejection of others. God chose Abraham, and then Israel for a special mission, and it was not to master or absorb others. Amos writes: 'Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? says the LORD. Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?' (Amos 9:7). In Isaiah we read: 'The LORD will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the LORD on that day, and will worship with sacrifice and burnt offering, and they will make vows to the LORD and perform them. The LORD will strike Egypt, striking and healing; they will return to the LORD, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them. On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage."' (Isaiah 19:21-25).

We begin with the stories about Abraham. As we read these stories we should expect to find indications of the interests and concerns of the people who told and listened to these stories over hundreds of years of story-telling. It is likely that as single units some of these stories were committed to writing prior to the fall of Jerusalem and the exile. In which case they would express some of the interests and concerns of that period. However, our main interest here is in the post-exilic period when those responsible for the written text of Genesis that we have before us were including these stories.

Stories are meant to be listened to, not explained. Some explanation, however, is needed, because these stories found a fixed form some two and a half thousand years ago in a culture very different from our own. We are not simply listening to stories. We are reading an ancient report. Our hope is that, like the seeds discovered in the chambers of ancient Egypt, these stories will come alive again for us.

All we know of Abraham is from the texts we are about to read. There are no inscriptions, no documents outside the Bible, and no monuments that speak of him. Some of these stories may have inspired the people of Judah as they grew into a tribe, as they became a kingdom, as they found themselves caught between the aspirations of Egypt and the kingdoms of Mesopotamia, as they experienced the exile and were trying to rebuild after the exile. They have continued to inspire the Jewish people ever since. They were also sacred to those Jews who became disciples of Jesus and, through them, they have continued to be treasured as stories of the origin of the Christian community. Similarly for the people of Islam some centuries later. Let us, therefore, allow our imagination to be captured by these stories, in the hope that they may inspire us who ‘share the faith of Abraham, the father of all of us’ (Romans 4:16).

The stories that were handed down in the folklore and legends of Judah have been re-shaped to present Abraham as a model for those who are to be obedient to the Torah. Ezekiel tells us that those who stayed behind in Judah during the exile thought the land should remain in their hands: ‘the inhabitants of these waste places in the land of Israel keep saying, “Abraham was only one man, yet he got possession of the land; but we are many; the land is surely given us to possess”’ (Ezekiel 33:24). The post-exilic authors want to show that Abraham is also the father of the returned exiles.

In reading these stories, we are in touch with the questions, the dreams, the hopes, the disappointments of post-exilic Judah. They have been through the destruction of their city and the terrible experience of exile. As they understood it, this was because they had broken the covenant made with Moses. It was important for them to remember that there was an older promise – an unconditional one given by God to the patriarchs: a promise made by God that transcended human fidelity or infidelity. Abraham believed it. So must they, for in their faith lay their hope.

Even though parts of the patriarchal stories may well be based on actual historical events, the aim of the writing was not to establish an archive of facts, but to remind the people of the old stories that were part of folklore and legend, and to inspire them to learn from the great men of their past. As we read these stories we should not think of ourselves as accumulating information about the distant past. Rather, we, too, should be looking for the meanings and values that inhere in the rich narratives. How did the authors see life? How did they understand God and God’s purposes in their history? How should they and their contemporaries live so as to be in tune with God’s designs for them? As we ask the same questions, may these stories sustain our faith in the God that they reveal.

²⁷**Now *this is the story* of Terah. Terah was the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran was the father of Lot.**

²⁸**Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans.**

²⁹**Abram and Nahor took wives; the name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah. She was the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah.**

³⁰**Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.**

³¹**Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there.**

³²**The days of Terah were two hundred five years; and Terah died in Haran.**

For the third time we have the word *tôl'dôt* followed by a genealogy (see 5:1; 10:1), indicating in this way the beginning of a new section. This is the beginning of the stories of the patriarchs, and these initial verses provide a link between the stories of the beginnings and those of the patriarchs, stories the origins of which are lost in the mists of time and oral tradition.

Abraham is linked to Shem through his father Terah (see Genesis 10:10-26), through Shem to Noah (Genesis 6:10), through Noah to Seth, and so to Adam (Genesis 5:1 - 6:8). The origins of the ancient father of Israel go back to the very beginnings of human history.

The story begins with a tragedy: a father suffers the loss of his son. What might this mean for the future of this family?

Ur was the capital of the old pagan world of southern Mesopotamia, and is named here for that reason. Perhaps also because those for whom the stories are being written have just come from the same region. Incidentally the 'Chaldeans' were in Ur at the time of the exile, not in patriarchal times. The names of the two wives reinforce this connection, for Sarah ('princess') was the wife of the moon god, Sin, worshipped in that area, and Milcah ('queen') was their daughter.

Verse thirty sets up the plot that will drive the Abraham saga. Sarah is barren. There is no apparent reason to hope that the blessing will be passed on through this couple. We have already witnessed God creating the cosmos out of a void. What might God choose to do from the barren womb of Sarah? Those who have just returned from the devastation of the exile know what it is to barren, and for there to be no human hope. However, they also had the words of encouragement spoken to them:

Sing, O barren one who did not bear; burst into song and shout, you who have not been in labour! For the children of the desolate woman will be more than the children of her that is married, says YHWH.

– Isaiah 54:1

Tradition placed the origins of the patriarchs in the area of Haran in Syria (spelt *ḥārān*, as distinct from Abraham's brother, spelt *hārān*, lacking the guttural ḥ).

These opening verses of chapter twelve offer us a summary picture of the nomadic life of Abraham, moving from ‘Haran’(12:4) ‘to the land of Canaan’(12:5), stopping over at ‘Shechem’(12:6) where there was a sacred tree associated with oracles. Verse six clearly indicates that this is a report, written about a time in the distant past when ‘the Canaanites were in the land’. Abraham made a further stop over between Bethel and the ancient deserted tel at Ai (12:8), whence he moved on to the Negeb, the wilderness south of the Judean hill country. We can assume that the authors are drawing on tradition here, as they are when they speak of the simple altars erected by Abraham (notice there is no mention of priests or sacrifices here), and of Abraham ‘invoking the name of YHWH’(12:8).

It is the authors of the text who identify the God worshipped by Abraham as YHWH, for Abraham is the model of those who ‘call on the name of YHWH’ in prayers of praise as well as prayers seeking protection:

O give thanks to YHWH, call on his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples.
Sing to him, sing praises to him;
tell of all his wonderful works.

– Psalm 105:1-2

I suffered distress and anguish.
Then I called on the name of YHWH:
“O YHWH, I pray, save my life!”

– Psalm 116:4

The key to this passage is the setting which the authors construct in order to put the whole of the Abraham stories in a special perspective. It is YHWH, the God of Israel, who is guiding Abraham’s steps, for YHWH, who brought forth creation where there was only chaos, is going to ensure the continuance of the blessing through Abraham (in spite of the barrenness of Sarah). Abraham’s family will become ‘a great nation’, and through them ‘all the families of the earth will be blessed’. God’s design is all-embracing (compare Psalm 72:17).

¹Now YHWH said to Abram,
“Go from your country and your
birthplace and your father’s
house to the land that I will show
you. ²I will make of you a great
nation, and I will bless you, and
make your name great, so that
you will be a blessing. ³I will
bless those who bless you, and
the one who curses you I will
curse; and in you all the families
of the earth shall be blessed.”

⁴So Abram went, as YHWH had
told him; and Lot went with him.
Abram was seventy-five years old
when he departed from Haran.

⁵Abram took his wife Sarai and
his brother’s son Lot, and all
the possessions that they had
gathered, and the persons whom
they had acquired in Haran; and
they set forth to go to the land of
Canaan. When they had come to
the land of Canaan,

⁶Abram passed through the land
to the place at Shechem, to the
oak of Moreh. At that time the
Canaanites were in the land.

⁷Then YHWH appeared to Abram,
and said, “To your offspring I
will give this land.” So he built
there an altar to YHWH, who had
appeared to him.

⁸From there he moved on to the
hill country on the east of Bethel,
and pitched his tent, with Bethel
on the west and Ai on the east;
and there he built an altar to
YHWH and invoked the name of
YHWH.

⁹And Abram journeyed on by
stages toward the Negeb.

Nothing is impossible to God

The primary focus of this introduction to the patriarchal stories is on YHWH, who can create a great nation out of nothing, in order to bless ‘all the families of the earth’(12:3). This is picked up by Paul in his reflections on Abraham. God promised Abraham: ‘I have made you the father of many nations’, for he is the God ‘who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist’(Romans 4:17).

Luke has the same perspective. Mary, who has miraculously conceived the Messiah, is moved to sing the praises of the One who ‘has lifted up the lowly’, ‘filled the hungry with good things’, and ‘come to the help of Israel his servant’. This is all because God is true ‘to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever’(Luke 1:55). When Jesus brings healing to the woman whom no doctor could help, Luke speaks of her as ‘a daughter of Abraham’(Luke 13:16). When the poor man dies who was neglected outside the gate of the rich man’s house, he is ‘carried away by the angels to be with Abraham’(Luke 16:22). When Zacchaeus is moved by Jesus’ welcome to give to the poor the profits from his work as a collector of taxes, he is described by Jesus as ‘a son of Abraham’(Luke 19:9). Luke has Peter reminding the people: ‘You are the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant that God gave to your ancestors, saying to Abraham: And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed’(Acts 3:25; see also Stephen’s speech in Acts 7:2-8).

Similarly with the author of the Letter to the Hebrews. He is appealing to the community not to despair in the face of persecution, and he recalls the story of Abraham who passed through ‘the land he had been promised, living in tents’(Hebrews 11:9). He reminds them that Abraham ‘received power of procreation even though he was too old – and Sarah herself was barren’(Hebrews 11:11).

In chapters 1-11, the authors of Genesis have just created their response to the ancient myths of Babylon. The God of Israel is YHWH, the creator of all that is. YHWH brought creation into being when all was chaos. Nothing, therefore, is impossible for God (see Luke 1:37). Now, as they prepare to retell the ancient stories of Israel’s ancestors, they want their readers to see their God creating Israel out of nothing as his instrument in bringing his blessing to the whole world.

This might seem impossible to the returned exiles, who do not possess the land and who have found their temple in ruins. Their ancestors were blessed by God. They, too, did not possess the land, and they, too, had no temple in which to worship. The covenant God made later with Moses had set out conditions that the people had to fulfil. The people failed; hence the destruction of the city and the exile. The authors are reminding their contemporaries, that God, long before Moses, made a promise to their ancestors – a promise not dependent on anything they could or could not do – a promise given by the One whose designs are not dependent on human capacity. In verse one YHWH promised to show Abraham a land. The promise is renewed in verse seven. In the centre of Canaan, YHWH says: ‘To your offspring I will give this land.’

It is in this context that the ancient stories are retold, and it is in this context that we, too, should read them, for these stories about Abraham ‘the father of all of us’(Romans 4:16) hold a message that we, too, need to hear.

Abraham faces two crises, both of them familiar to those living a nomadic life that is dependent on the seasons and powerless against those who own the land. Faced with a severe famine, he decides to migrate to Egypt (see chapter 42). However this means that he and all he owns are at the mercy of the most powerful ruler in the world who can do whatever he wants.

The story focuses on the worst possible situation. What if the pharaoh takes Sarah into his house? What will happen to the promise of God if that happens? Abraham has not yet learned to rely on God, so he does the only thing he can think of doing: he pretends that Sarah is his sister. That may save his life. What else can a powerless nomad do when faced with a ruler who 'can take as a wife for himself whoever he chooses'(Genesis 6:2)?

Abraham's ruse works. He is even rewarded, for the pharaoh is happy to flaunt his wealth as much as his power. However, while Abraham has saved his life, he has done so by putting God's promise at risk. What now?

Only YHWH can save the day, and he does by demonstrating that he is more powerful than the pharaoh. This is not a story of crime and punishment. Rather, it is a story of where power ultimately lies, and it is with YHWH. Abraham's lack of faith does not cancel out the promise, but it does affect him (and so Israel), and the world that needs him to believe. This is not the last time that Egypt will suffer a plague!

Knowing what he is up against, the pharaoh gives Sarah back and has Abraham escorted to the border. At the same time his words hold a reprimand for Abraham. He thought that to save his life the only thing he could do was to put at risk the vocation to which God was calling him. YHWH has promised. YHWH will see that what he has promised will be fulfilled. Abraham has to learn to believe in the promise of YHWH.

¹⁰Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien, for the famine was severe in the land.

¹¹When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance; ¹²and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife'; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. ¹³Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account."

¹⁴When Abram entered Egypt the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful.

¹⁵When the officials of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house.

¹⁶And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, female donkeys, and camels.

¹⁷But YHWH afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife.

¹⁸So Pharaoh called Abram, and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?"

¹⁹Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her, and be gone."

²⁰And Pharaoh gave his men orders concerning him; and they set him on the way, with his wife and all that he had.

¹So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife, and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the Negeb.

²Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. ³He journeyed on by stages from the Negeb as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, ⁴to the place where he had made an altar at the first; and there Abram called on the name of YHWH.

⁵Now Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, ⁶so that the land could not support both of them living together; for their possessions were so great that they could not live together, ⁷and there was strife between the herders of Abram's livestock and the herders of Lot's livestock. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites lived in the land.

⁸Then Abram said to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herders and my herders; for we are kindred. ⁹Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left."

¹⁰Lot looked about him, and saw that the plain of the Jordan was well watered everywhere like the garden of YHWH, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar; this was before YHWH had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. ¹¹So Lot chose for himself all the plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward; thus they separated from each other. ¹²Abram camped in the land of Canaan, while Lot camped among the cities of the Plain and moved his tent as far as Sodom.

¹³Now the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against YHWH.

This scene and the previous scene belong together. There we saw Abraham's lack of faith. Here he is presented as a model of it.

He is back in the Negeb (see 12:9), and he returns with his sheep and goats to an earlier pasture between Bethel and Ai (see 12:8).

He has become so prosperous that it is necessary to separate his flocks and those of Lot. A quarrel breaks out between Abraham's herders and those of Lot – the kind of quarrel that leads to war between larger and more powerful groups. We have already been warned of the consequences of envy and jealousy between brothers in the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4). Now Abraham demonstrates a better way to solve such problems. He risks all in faith. In so doing, he highlights the providence of God that is guiding him, for he ends up with the land that God has earlier promised him.

The reference to Egypt (13:10) links us with the previous scene. Lot hopes to insure himself against famine. The reference to the garden of YHWH is a link with Genesis 3. Like Eve, Lot is enchanted by how the Jordan plain appears (see Genesis 3:6). The fact that Sodom is mentioned three times prepares us for a tragedy soon to unfold. The description of the people of Sodom recalls the build up to the flood (see Genesis 6:5).

As in 12:1-3 and 12:7, it is in the words spoken by YHWH that we discern the focus intended by the authors. Lot followed his own desires and chose accordingly. We are already prepared for an outcome that is not good. Abraham is not like Lot. He has learned what it is to have faith, and his generous offer to Lot is now blessed. He, too, gazes out over the land, but not from his own desire. Rather, he gazes in wonder at what God is promising him (See 12:7) – a promise also for ‘his offspring forever’ (13:15).

How the word ‘forever’ must have rung in the ears of the exiles just returned from exile! How it has continued to inspire and encourage their offspring to this day! This includes the Jews who caught the flame lit in their hearts by Jesus. Paul reminds the Christian communities of Galatia: ‘God granted the inheritance to Abraham through the promise’ (Galatians 3:18). The inheritance, for Paul, is the communion with God that is offered through communion with Jesus. This communion is offered to the whole world, as is clear from the final words of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

– Matthew 28:18-20

Abraham is told to ‘walk through the length and breadth of the land’ to stake out his claim, so he breaks camp and heads south to Hebron in what will later be Judah.

¹⁴YHWH said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, “Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; ¹⁵for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. ¹⁶I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one *could* count the dust of the earth, your offspring also *could* be counted. ¹⁷Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you.”

¹⁸So Abram moved his tent, and came and settled by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron; and there he built an altar to YHWH.

¹In the days of King Amraphel of Shinar, King Arioch of Ellasar, King Chedorlaomer of Elam, and King Tidal of Goiim, ²these kings made war with King Bera of Sodom, King Birsha of Gomorrah, King Shinab of Admah, King Shemeber of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar). ³All these joined forces in the Valley of Siddim (that is, the Dead Sea). ⁴Twelve years they had served Chedorlaomer, but in the thirteenth year they rebelled. ⁵In the fourteenth year Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him came and subdued the Rephaim in Ashteroth-karnaim, the Zuzim in Ham, the Emim in Shaveh-kiriathaim, ⁶and the Horites in the hill country of Seir as far as El-paran on the edge of the wilderness; ⁷then they turned back and came to En-mishpat (that is, Kadesh), and subdued all the country of the Amalekites, and also the Amorites who lived in Hazazon-tamar.

⁸Then the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admah, the king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar) went out, and they joined battle in the Valley of Siddim⁹with King Chedorlaomer of Elam, King Tidal of Goiim, King Amraphel of Shinar, and King Arioch of Ellasar, four kings against five. ¹⁰Now the Valley of Siddim was full of bitumen pits; and as the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, some fell into them, and the rest fled to the hill country. ¹¹So the enemy took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their provisions, and went their way.

The first thing to notice is that Abraham is not mentioned in these first eleven verses. They reproduce the kind of report that was typical in the annals of empires in relation to their treatment of rebellious vassal kings.

We have already heard of ‘Shinar’ (14:1; see Genesis 10:10 and 11:2). It is a name for the region of Babylon. Arioch is a Hurrian name. Elam (14:1), too, has been mentioned (see Genesis 10:22). Elam lay to the east of Mesopotamia. Tidal is a Hittite name. So the four kings represent four ancient powerful kingdoms in the East. The vassal kings are located in the area of the Dead Sea (14:3).

The details need not interest us here, as the aim of the post-exilic authors in the remaining verses of chapter fourteen is to portray Abraham as a hero on the world stage.

The name ‘Rephaim’ (14:5) is used elsewhere for the ‘spirits of the dead’ (see Isaiah 26:14,19 and Psalm 88:10), and for the giants who inhabited Canaan (see Genesis 15:20).

The Horites (14:6) were a tribe to the south of Judah in the area of ‘Seir’ and ‘Paran’. Likewise the ‘Amalekites’ (14:7), who lived just north of the oasis of ‘Kadesh’ (14:7). ‘Amorite’ is an old term used in Mesopotamia for people from ‘the west’.

‘Sodom and Gomorrah’ (14:8, 10, 11) form a link with the previous story (see 13:10), and prepare us for the following story of Lot.

Among the stories preserved in Genesis this portrayal of Abraham is unique. He is presented as a hero, a saviour figure, mighty in battle against the mightiest rulers of the east. It is a story such as one might expect to find in the very different literature of the Book of Judges, or in the accounts given of king David (see 1Samuel 30). It is also an image that the authors thought their contemporaries needed to hear, in the light of their recent humiliation and present subjection to the rulers of the areas featured here.

For the first time Abraham is called a 'Hebrew' ('ibri) - a term that sets him apart from other national groups. Its origins may be in the term 'abiru, used for stateless people, easily enslaved in the ancient Near East and Egypt. Abraham is the father of the family and as such will defend its members against any power that rises up against them.

The fact that verse 21 fits perfectly after verse 17 is an indication that those responsible for the text of Genesis as we have it, have inserted 14:18-20 here. We will suggest a reason on the following page.

Abraham has taken an oath not to enrich himself from the spoils of war. This is a theme that we find repeated throughout the Pentateuch. Israel has a right to defend itself, but there is no place for wars of aggression. The booty is to be returned to those from whom it was taken.

¹²They also took Lot, the son of Abram's brother, who lived in Sodom, and his goods, and departed.

¹³Then one who had escaped came and told Abram the Hebrew, who was living by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and of Aner; these were allies of Abram. ¹⁴When Abram heard that his nephew had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men, born in his house, three hundred eighteen of them, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. ¹⁵He divided his forces against them by night, he and his servants, and routed them and pursued them to Hobah, north of Damascus.

¹⁶Then he brought back all the goods, and also brought back his nephew Lot with his goods, and the women and the people.

¹⁷After his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley).

[Verses 18-20 - see following page]

²¹Then the king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give me the persons, but take the goods for yourself."

²²But Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have sworn to YHWH, God Most High, maker of heaven and earth, ²³that I would not take a thread or a sandal-thong or anything that is yours, so that you might not say, 'I have made Abram rich.' ²⁴I will take nothing but what the young men have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me—Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre. Let them take their share."

¹⁸And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. ¹⁹He blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; ²⁰and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!" And Abram gave him one tenth of everything.

From offstage, and for the first and only time, appears King Melchizedek. His name means 'my king is righteous'. He is king of Salem, which, as far back as the Aramaic versions, has been identified as Jerusalem (see also Psalm 76:2). This is one reason for the insertion of the story here. He brings out food and drink for the exhausted troops.

Though a king, he is also a priest. There is nothing strange in this, but it would have sounded strange to the Jews, for in their tradition a king had to be from the tribe of Judah, whereas a priest had to be from the tribe of Levi. At the same time they recognised the king as the one whose consecration to YHWH exceeded any other – which is why, in the only other text in which Melchizedek appears in the Hebrew Scriptures, the king is recognised as having a superior priesthood: 'according to the order of Melchizedek' (Psalm 110:4).

He is a priest of a Canaanite sanctuary of 'God Most High' ('el 'elyôn), identified here as the 'maker of heaven and earth', and the one who has 'delivered your enemies into your hand'. God Most High is a title used for YHWH in the Temple cult in Jerusalem (see Psalm 18:13; 46:4; 78:35,56) – another reason for the inclusion of this story here. Another link with temple custom is the offering of a tithe.

In the temple liturgy God is referred to as the 'creator of heaven and earth' in prayers of trust that God will protect his people (see Psalm 121:2), and also in prayers of blessing (see Psalm 115:15; 134:4).

The inclusion of this story here is also a link back to the stories of the beginnings, reminding us that YHWH who has made promises to Abraham is the Creator.

Psalm 146 nicely captures a key message of Genesis 14:

Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.
When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.
Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in YHWH their God, who made
heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever.

– Psalm 146:1-3

This chapter brings together the two promises on which the people of Israel base their hopes: the promise of descendants (15:1-6) and the promise of land (15:7-21). The authors want their contemporaries to hold on to their faith and their hope in both.

At last, and in a dramatic way, Abraham gives voice to the central issue. God has promised to make him 'a great nation' (12:2), and has spoken of his 'seed' (12:7), but the promise means nothing if Abraham does not have a son to inherit it.

Earlier YHWH had promised: 'I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth' (13:16). Now YHWH tells Abraham to gaze into the heavens that demonstrate God's power (see Psalm 8 and Isaiah 40:26), and promises that Abraham's descendants will be as numerous as the stars.

The final verse explains the reason for the insertion of this passage here. At a time of intense suffering and humiliation, the authors want their contemporaries to 'believe YHWH'. Abraham was free. Faith is not forced. The promise is made unconditionally, but it can have its effect only if it is freely welcomed. Abraham chooses to believe when all he has to rely on is God's word. In this he is our model, our father in faith (see Hebrews 11:8-12).

YHWH accepts Abraham's faith. The formula of acceptance is a cultic one, the priest's formal acknowledgment that a gift offered in sacrifice is appropriate, and so 'reckoned as righteousness [rightwiseness: wise as to what is according to God's will]'. Paul quotes verse six in his study of the essence of faith (Romans 4:3; also Galatians 3:6, see page 4).

God is the giver. We cannot earn God's gifts. To receive them, however, we must welcome them, for Love never forces itself upon us. Faith is precisely the welcoming of grace. We must do as Abraham did.

¹After these things the word of YHWH came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."

²But Abram said, "O Lord YHWH, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir."

⁴But the word of YHWH came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." ⁵He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be."

⁶And he believed YHWH; and YHWH reckoned it to him as righteousness.

⁷Then he said to him, "I am YHWH who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess."

⁸But he said, "O Lord YHWH, how am I to know that I shall possess it?"

⁹He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." ¹⁰He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. ¹¹And when *carrion* birds came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

¹²As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

¹³Then YHWH said to Abram, "Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; ¹⁴but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. ¹⁵As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. ¹⁶And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

¹⁷When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.

Here is the second promise: land (see already 12:7 and 13:15), and God seals it with an oath. It can never be broken.

The idea of cutting the animals in two and walking between them is to demonstrate that the person making the commitment is calling down upon himself the fate of the animals if he does not keep his word (see Jeremiah 34:18). YHWH is portrayed as offering the same solemn assurance when the 'smoking fire pot and the flaming torch', signs of his presence, 'passed between the pieces'(15:17).

Tension is added to the story by the presence of the vultures – an ill omen. Abraham 'drove them away'(15:11).

In verses 13-16 we have a reflection on history dressed up as a prophecy. The authors think of God as controlling everything (see pages 27-29). In their understanding, whatever has happened in their history must have been intended by God and so must be consistent with God's promises and God's design for them. We must believe even when it seems that the promise may never be realised (see Habakkuk 2:3).

The solemn commitment (b^crît) is the gift of the Promised Land in its most ambitious extension, comprising all of Canaan and Syria, from the Brook of Egypt, separating Egypt and Canaan, to the Euphrates (also 2Kings 24:7).

Following Egyptian practice the indigenous inhabitants are referred to as ‘Canaanites’ (15:21). ‘Amorite’ (15:21; see 10:16) means ‘Westerner’, and was a term in general use in the ancient Near East for the people to the west of Mesopotamia. With the complete breakdown of law and order in the late Bronze Age (thirteenth century BC), the Amorites seem to have migrated south and taken control of various parts of Canaan and Transjordan.

The other ethnic groups seem to have migrated into Canaan at about the same time. In his *Deuteronomy 1-11* (Anchor Bible, 1991, 363) Weinfeld writes :

The Hittites constituted an empire in Anatolia [central Turkey] and Syria in the fifteenth and fourteenth century B.C.E. After the collapse of the Hittite Empire at the end of the thirteenth century, when the ‘sea peoples’ attacked the Anatolian and Syrian coast, there came down to Palestine hosts of refugees and immigrants consisting of various ethnic groups including Hittites, Jebusites, Hivites and Girgashites, who settled in the densely populated areas in the hill country. They seized power in the few existing cities in the mountains such as Shechem, Gibeon, and Hebron.

The three main ethnic groups are reflected in Ezekiel:

Thus says the Lord YHWH to Jerusalem: Your origin and your birth were in the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite.

– Ezekiel 16:3

The Jebusites (15:21; see 10:16) controlled Jerusalem till David captured the city and made it the capital of the United Kingdom (see 2Samuel 5:6-10). The Kenites (15:19) lived in the southern Negeb. The Kenizzites and Kadmonites (15:19) are listed only here. We have met the Perizzites (15:20) in 13:7 and the Girgashites (15:21) in 10:16. Legends spoke of the Rephaim (15:20; see 14:5) as giants. They are connected with the Nephilim (Genesis 6:4), and were associated with Bashan in northern Transjordan, east of the sea of Galilee, and also with parts of Canaan.

¹⁸On that day YHWH made a solemn commitment to Abram, saying, “To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates, ¹⁹the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, ²⁰the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, ²¹the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”

¹Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, ²and Sarai said to Abram, "You see that YHWH has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.

³So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. ⁴He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress.

⁵Then Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May YHWH judge between you and me!" ⁶But Abram said to Sarai, "Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her.

⁷YHWH's messenger found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur.

⁸And he said, "Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai."

We have just heard YHWH giving a solemn promise to Abraham: 'your very own issue shall be your heir'(15:4). But the promise is long in coming, and we have another scene in which Sarah and then Abraham fail in faith and try to take things into their own hands. Faced with the fact that YHWH has not taken away her barrenness (see 11:30), Sarah seeks a solution in a practice that was not uncommon among ancient nomads – she offers Abraham her own personal handmaid. She is anxious to secure her place in the family.

Her strategy works, but leads to jealousy. Hagar is naturally proud of being a wife to Abraham and the mother of his child. Sarah feels her own humiliation all the more acutely, and demands that Abraham repudiate Hagar, and reinstate her, Sarah, as his only wife. Her jealousy puts her original plan in jeopardy. Abraham does what Sarah wants, and Sarah treats Hagar so badly that Hagar sees no way out except to flee.

We have another example of the failure of human planning. Abraham's ruse in passing Sarah off as his wife required YHWH to intervene (12:17). What will YHWH do now? God has promised. Can God be trusted?

Verse seven begins a second story which the authors have skilfully joined to 16:1-6. The expression 'YHWH's messenger' ('the angel of YHWH') occurs 58 times in the Older Testament. It is not to be imagined as a heavenly being. It is a simple meeting between strangers at a well. God is present, certainly, but in the message not the messenger, as we will see.

'Shur' means 'walled' and indicates the presence of an Egyptian walled outpost, guarding the road.

There are three messages. The authors of Genesis seem to have inherited all three, depending on how the story was told. The first message (16:9) is a command to Hagar to return to Sarah. It is God's will that her son be the son of Abraham (see 21:13).

The second message (16:10) is a promise that Hagar will have so huge an offspring that they will not be able to be counted. Reference is to the powerful tribes of the northern Arabian desert.

The third message is in a classic form for a promise of a son and salvation. YHWH, who always hears the cry of the poor, 'has given heed to Hagar's affliction.' The name Ishmael means 'God hears'.

Luke uses the same form in the message given by God to Mary through the 'angel', Gabriel. After the initial greeting (Luke 1:28, compare Genesis 16:8), the angel delivers the following message:

You have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.

– Luke 1:30-32

Verse twelve describes how the Ishmaelites were seen by the people of Israel at a later time when both Israel and the Ishmaelites were in constant conflict.

Hagar speaks of YHWH as El-roi ('ēl ro'î – 'God who sees me'), and the well's name seems to mean: 'well of the living one who sees me'. 'Bered' occurs only here. The well is in the vicinity of Kadesh, 95ks south of Beer-Sheba.

After uniting these two stories from the tradition, the authors conclude with part of a genealogy which will continue in Genesis 25:12.

⁹YHWH's messenger said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her."

¹⁰YHWH's messenger also said to her, "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude."

¹¹And YHWH's messenger said to her, "Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for YHWH has given heed to your affliction."

¹²He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin."

¹³So she named YHWH who spoke to her, "You are El-roi"; for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?"

¹⁴Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

¹⁵Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael.

¹⁶Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

¹When Abram was ninety-nine years old, YHWH appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. ²And I will make my solemn promise between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous."³Then Abram fell on his face;

and God said to him, ⁴"As for me, this is my solemn promise to you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷I will establish my solemn promise between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting promise, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God."

This chapter reflects the priestly perspective on the essential elements of the covenant that binds Israel to God as God's chosen people. In verses 1-3 they are repeating God's promise (compare Genesis 12:1-3). For the rest of the chapter they are offering an elaboration and interpretation of the tradition.

'God Almighty' (Hebrew 'El šaddai) is the title given to God in the patriarchal stories by the Priestly School (see Exodus 6:3). This is to distinguish the patriarchal title from both 'elohim (used in the primeval creation story) and YHWH (revealed to Moses). Abraham the nomad is instructed to remember that in his journeys he is in God's presence, and that he is to act accordingly without reservation (reservations such as we have witnessed in previous scenes).

'Solemn promise' (17:2,3,7) translates the Hebrew b'rît (see 15:18). So far there is no talk of Abraham having to do anything. He is called only to believe. The change of name (different dialects for 'exalted father') indicates a change in situation. God solemnly and permanently establishes him as 'the ancestor of a multitude of nations'. We might recall Jesus bestowing on Simon the new name 'Peter' (Matthew 16:18).

This is reinforced by use of the words 'everlasting' (17:7) and 'perpetual' (17:8) – Hebrew 'ōlam. This word takes us back to the promise made to Noah (Genesis 9:16). God is establishing a 'new creation' in Abraham. The solemn commitment made by God is made also to Abraham's offspring. As we would expect, it includes the promise of land, but the accent throughout this chapter is on God's presence ('I will be their God') - presence that is guaranteed even when the people do not possess the land, but live in it, like Abraham, as aliens (17:8). It is not difficult to see how important such a message was to the exiles in Babylon, and to those who returned from Babylon to a Judah that was under the command of Persia.

Psalm 139 is a prayer reflection on the theme of this passage.

Here the Hebrew *b'rit* goes beyond being an unconditional and solemn assurance or promise given by God, and takes on more of the meaning of covenant. A commitment is also required of Abraham.

The origins of the practice of circumcision are obscure. It may have originally been a rite of passage to manhood. It may also have been a magic ritual to fend off evil spirits that threatened to make a man impotent. It was a widespread practice among Semitic peoples (and elsewhere), but was not practised either among the Philistines or among the Assyrians or Babylonians. It seems to have become important as an identifying sign only at the time of the exile, when the people of Judah were deprived of other identifying signs (king, temple, cult). It set them apart from the Babylonians in whose land they were exiled.

As a religious sign it is clearly related to the handing on of life, and so to the 'blessing'. It became a sign of the trust that God would, indeed, ensure a great offspring to Abraham (and so to Israel). In the very act of sexual intercourse, man and woman are reminded that the life offered and received is filled with promise.

With no public cult available, the persevering in faith of the family became crucial to maintaining their identity in a foreign land. Hence the importance of the whole family, including slaves, being obliged to comply with this law.

Like Abraham, Sarah receives a new name. Like Abram and Abraham, Sarai and Sarah have the same meaning ('princess'). She, the one whose barrenness has dominated the previous stories, is to be the mother of 'nations' and 'peoples'. The change of name denotes more than a promise. This is final and definitive.

⁹God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹²Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. ¹³Both the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money must be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."

¹⁵God said to Abraham, "As for Sarah your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

¹⁷Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"

¹⁸And Abraham said to God, "O that Ishmael might live in your sight!"

¹⁹God said, "No, but your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.

²⁰As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.

²¹But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year."

²²And when he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.

²³Then Abraham took his son Ishmael and all the slaves born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him.

²⁴Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁵And his son Ishmael was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

²⁶That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised; ²⁷and all the men of his house, slaves born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

While the Hebrew Scriptures are clear that God made a special covenant with Abraham, and that God chose to overturned cultural expectations by achieving his purpose through Abraham's second son, Isaac (not his firstborn, Ishmael).

Two things are to be noted. The first is that the covenant made with Abraham in no way replaced the covenant made with Noah in which God expressed God's commitment to all the peoples of the earth.

The second is that the choice of Isaac did not involve a rejection of Abraham's firstborn son, Ishmael, nor of the Arab peoples, descendant from him.

Abraham never rejected Ishmael, as clearly indicated by his plea in verse 18. Nor did God, as clearly indicated in verse 20. On the contrary God blessed Ishmael in a special way, as already promised in 16:10.

In the verses that follow it emerges that these strangers are sent by God to deliver a message. Hence the opening verse that prepares us to see this as a revelation of YHWH.

Without that identification - which becomes clear only later – we are reading a typical Bedouin story of hospitality. The scene takes place outside Abraham's tent by the oaks of Mamre (see 13:18; 14:13). Abraham behaves as one does in that world. Hospitality is offered not to people whom the host chooses, but to anyone who is in need. The respect shown by Abraham is also typical, for it may be that the strangers are in fact of a higher social status. Proper order requires that this be presumed.

Abraham's offer of refreshments and rest – he does not offer them lodging – is appropriately understated. He must give the impression that they are not presenting him with any inconvenience.

Scholars suggest that we have here what was originally a separate story (perhaps inspired by a story from the Ugarit *Tale of Aqhat* V.6-7), a typical story of a messenger sent by God with the promise of a son. As is usual in such stories, the promise is made to the mother. This promise has dominated the plot of these Abraham stories.

As these verses occur here in Genesis they take on the aspect of hospitality being rewarded by God – an idea picked up by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, who, reflecting on this scene, writes: 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it' (Hebrews 13:2)..

¹YHWH appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ²He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. ³He said, "My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said."

⁶And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." ⁷Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

⁹They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent."

¹⁰Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him.

Everything is possible for God

¹¹Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.

¹²So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?"

¹³YHWH said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' ¹⁴Is anything too wonderful for YHWH? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son."

¹⁵But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

¹⁶Then the men set out from there

We are reminded of the human impossibility of conceiving a child, in order to highlight the wonderful action of God.

Sarah's laugh is humanly understandable. It highlights the fact that faith is not to be measured by standards that would seem sensible from a natural point of view. (Incidentally, the word 'pleasure', 'ednāh, is from the same root as 'Eden.) We are dealing here with divine power: 'Is anything too wonderful to God?' (18:14). This is the central question of this narrative. The authors wanted their contemporaries to ask the same question, and, of course, we should do the same.

In the parallel scene in the New Testament, Mary asks 'How can this be?', and is reminded that 'Nothing is impossible with God' (Luke 1:37). Mary's response is a perfect response of faith: 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word' (Luke 1:38).

Jesus is confident that 'for God all things are possible' (Mark 10:27) – a truth that supported him in his own agony where he prayed: 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want' (Mark 14:36).

Aware now that the message is from YHWH, Sarah wishes that she had not laughed, but is reminded that she did. The reminder is to reinforce the need for faith. It may also be to reinforce the link with the name that her son is to have.

As is clear from the opening verse, Genesis 18:16-33 forms a link between the previous story about the three 'men', and the following story that tells of the destruction of 'Sodom' (see already 13:10,13). The significance of this passage becomes clear only after reading Chapter 19. The post-exilic authors of Genesis deemed it necessary to probe more deeply into the question of God's justice before presenting the ancient story of the destruction of Sodom, which, without further reflection, could leave the reader with a seriously faulty image of a God whose primary response to sin was to destroy. This was not an uncommon image of God in the ancient Near East, but it fell far short of the God revealed to Moses.

Their theological reflections take the form of a story. YHWH has heard terrible things about Sodom and the neighbouring city of Gomorrah (see 13:10). He decides to consult Abraham to check whether things are as bad as he has heard. The image of God going down from heaven to check things out reminds us of the story of the Tower of Babel (see Genesis 11:5, 7).

The importance of what is about to unfold is highlighted by the high praise YHWH gives of Abraham. The prophet Amos had said: 'Surely the Lord YHWH does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets' (Amos 3:7). Here we see God doing just that to Abraham.

We are reminded of Abraham's special position as the father of Israel, and that 'all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him' (18:18; see 12:2-3), but then in verse nineteen he is described in terms that are typical of the Law. Abraham is to see that 'his household after him' (Israel) is 'to keep the way of YHWH by doing righteousness and justice.' Furthermore, this is presented as a condition: 'so that YHWH may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.' The authors of Genesis are concerned to avoid a repetition of the destruction of Jerusalem by insisting on the people keeping their part of the covenant, as they attempt to re-establish a faithful community. It has a very different ring about it to the unconditional assurance that we find in the ancient stories. It is not Abraham's faith that is stressed here but his 'righteousness and justice'.

¹⁶Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way.

¹⁷YHWH thought, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, ¹⁸seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? ¹⁹No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of YHWH by doing righteousness and justice; so that YHWH may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

²⁰Then YHWH said, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! ²¹I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know."

²²So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before YHWH.

²³Then Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? ²⁵Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?"

²⁶And YHWH said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake."

²⁷Abraham answered, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. ²⁸Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there."

²⁹Again he spoke to him, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it."

³⁰Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there."

³¹He said, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it."

³²Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." ³³And YHWH went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

Three men came unexpectedly to Abraham's tent (18:2). Two of them now go on to Sodom (see 19:1), and one remains with Abraham. They have already been identified as messengers through whom YHWH speaks (18:1, 13).

The righteous and just Abraham is asking YHWH a question that we find explored again and again in literature from the exilic and post-exilic period: 'Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?' 'Shall not the Judge of the earth do what is just?'

The simple notion that, since God is just, suffering can only be punishment for sin, could hardly be a satisfactory answer to a situation in which a whole city is destroyed. Jeremiah touches on the problem but is still thinking of a group as a whole, without considering innocent individuals in the group (see Jeremiah 18:7-10). Ezekiel is confident that innocent individuals would be saved as individuals, but this would not save anyone else (see Ezekiel 14:12-20). One could get the same impression from the story we are about to read, where Lot is saved but the rest of the city destroyed.

Job struggles with the whole concept of innocent people suffering. His preliminary assessment is that God 'destroys both the blameless and the wicked' (Job 9:22). In the end he gives up the struggle. He admits: 'I have uttered what I did not understand' (Job 42:3). He concludes that we haven't the wisdom to explore such matters.

The prophet Malachi is still struggling: 'Now we count the arrogant happy; evildoers not only prosper, but when they put God to the test they escape' (Malachi 3:14).

In this passage the authors of Genesis are asking: In the light of what we know of YHWH's relationship with Abraham, and his intention to bless all the nations of the earth through him, can we take the following chapter (Genesis 19) at its face value? Surely there must be more to God's justice than retribution and saving a few innocent people. Surely punishing is not as important as valuing righteousness. Surely the effect of righteousness cannot be limited simply to the person who is righteous. Surely it must have some effect on the sinful. What is at stake here is God's holiness.

We already know that Sodom will be destroyed. That is the story that has come down through the tradition and the authors will present it faithfully. Nothing can change that. However in the engaging and persistent questioning of God by Abraham, the authors are attempting to develop a more subtle and more satisfactory understanding of YHWH's action in the world. The decreasing numbers from fifty to ten gives tension and interest to the story. It is peripheral to the main point, however, which is that righteousness is an active power that can overcome evil and avert its consequences.

This goes further than either the story of Noah and the flood, or the following story of Lot and the destruction of Sodom. In both of these only the innocent are spared. In the passage upon which we are reflecting it emerges that the innocent can redeem a city that is otherwise evil. In making this claim the authors of Genesis are offering a critique of the older and unsatisfactory tradition.

This reinforces the point made in the Introduction to this commentary that we should not conclude from the inspired nature of the Bible that each and every narrative should be taken as God's final word. Again and again the Bible itself makes it evident that there is a struggle going on for deeper understanding. This passage is a good example of this. The theologians responsible for it are aligning themselves with Hosea who has God say:

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim?

[note that these cities are associated with Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 10:19]

My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

– Hosea 11:8-9

They are also in the tradition of the Isaiah School of the exile who know that the suffering servant has a role in saving others:

He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed ...
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of YHWH shall prosper.

– Isaiah 53:5,10

In the light of what we know of God and God's justice through Jesus, we can say that the understanding of the authors of Genesis is still imperfect, but it is an advance over the simpler (and dangerous) understanding revealed in the scene we are about to explore. We will have more to say on this issue at the end of our commentary on Genesis 19.

¹The two *messengers* came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. ²He said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way." They said, "No; we will spend the night in the square." ³But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. ⁴But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; ⁵and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them." ⁶Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, ⁷and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. ⁸Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." ⁹But they replied, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. ¹⁰But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. ¹¹And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door.

The two men are two of three who were given hospitality by Abraham (see 18:2,16,22). We already know that they on a mission from YHWH (see 18:1,13). Like Abraham, Lot offers them hospitality.

We have already been told that 'the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against YHWH'(13:13), and 'How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin!'(18:20). Their crime is described here in a dreadful scene that parallels a similar but even more dreadful crime described in Judges 19:15ff. In both scenes we have examples of homosexual lust and the violation of the right of a guest to protection.

The fact that in both scenes (much worse in Judges) the host in desperation offers women in place of the male guests tells us something about the value given to men as against women in this ancient society.

As the word 'sodomy' shows, it is the homosexual lust that has caught the main attention of readers over the centuries. It is essential, however, to note that this is not where the accent lay in Biblical times. When Isaiah accuses his contemporaries of behaving like Sodom, he is referring to injustice (Isaiah 1:10, 3:9). Jeremiah focuses on 'adultery' in the sense of being unfaithful to the covenant, and disregard for the truth (Jeremiah 23:14). Ezekiel's focus is on 'pride, gluttony and prosperous ease' while neglecting to 'aid the poor and needy'(Ezekiel 16:49).

Once again it is clear that the men are on a mission from YHWH. Two things are being stated. The first is that YHWH will destroy the city because of the evil in it and because of ‘the outcry against its people.’ To this extent it is a straightforward story of crime requiring punishment. It will become apparent later that even Lot’s sons-in-law do not survive the destruction. They had the opportunity to do so, but failed to take God’s judgment seriously. We are all being warned!

The second is that YHWH shows ‘mercy’(19:16, *hamlâ* – the only occurrence of this word in Genesis), and so will save the innocent individual. This invites comparison with Noah and the Flood, except that we are dealing here with Lot, not Abraham, so it is God’s justice to the innocent that features here, and not the significance for the world.

This is as far as the story goes. As we have already noted, the authors of Genesis attempt a better understanding of God’s justice in the verses that introduce chapter 19.

Verses 15-23 are a digression, possibly from a separate story to explain the origins of Zoar, on the southeastern shore of the Dead Sea. ‘Little one’(miz‘ar) has a similar sound to Zoar. In context these verses heighten the suspense as we await what will happen to Sodom.

¹²Then the men said to Lot, “Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city—bring them out of the place. ¹³For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before YHWH, and YHWH has sent us to destroy it.”

¹⁴So Lot went out and said to his sons-in-law, who were to marry his daughters, “Up, get out of this place; for YHWH is about to destroy the city.” But he seemed to his sons-in-law to be jesting.

¹⁵When morning dawned, the *messengers* urged Lot, saying, “Get up, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or else you will be consumed in the punishment of the city.” ¹⁶But he lingered; so the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, YHWH being merciful to him, and they brought him out and left him outside the city. ¹⁷When they had brought them outside, they said, “Flee for your life; do not look back or stop anywhere in the Plain; flee to the hills, or else you will be consumed.”

¹⁸And Lot said to them, “Oh, no, my lords; ¹⁹your servant has found favour with you, and you have shown me great kindness in saving my life; but I cannot flee to the hills, for fear the disaster will overtake me and I die. ²⁰Look, that city is near enough to flee to, and it is a little one. Let me escape there—is it not a little one?—and my life will be saved!” ²¹He said to him, “Very well, I grant you this favour too, and will not overthrow the city of which you have spoken. ²²Hurry, escape there, for I can do nothing until you arrive there.” Therefore the city was called Zoar. ²³The sun had risen on the earth when Lot came to Zoar.

²⁴Then YHWH rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from YHWH out of heaven; ²⁵and he overthrew those cities, and all the Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground.

²⁶But Lot's wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

²⁷Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before YHWH; ²⁸and he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the Plain and saw the smoke of the land going up like the smoke of a furnace.

²⁹So it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain, God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in which Lot had settled.

The Dead Sea is part of the deepest fissure in the earth's crust which extends down to Lake Victoria in East Africa. It must have been the scene of cataclysmic events in the distant past. The experiences of volcanic action and earthquakes accounts for the imagery of the story, just as the experience of floods accounts for the imagery of the Flood in the story of the beginnings. In fact many parallels can be made between the destruction of Sodom and the Flood. The story here must have grown out of people gazing upon the desolate landscape. It was an obvious symbol to use for divine destruction, and so for sin and punishment. No story is referred to more in both the Old and New Testaments, so powerful did it prove as a warning against sin.

We have already seen how the authors of Genesis attempted to put this scene in perspective in their introductory reflection (18:16-32). They return to this by introducing Abraham again here (19:27-29). The turning point of the Flood was when 'God remembered Noah'(Genesis 8:1). The phrase occurs again here: 'God remembered Abraham'(19:29). Lot is saved, not because of his righteousness, but because of the righteousness of Abraham (see 18:19). The authors are insisting that it is possible for a just person to bring salvation to others. We are together in this world. It is not evil that has the most power, it is good, and just as a just man, Noah, saved the world from destruction, so a just man, Abraham, has saved Lot. This is part of Abraham's mission and it must be part of the mission of Israel, for they are called for the sake of the world.

A final comment. Though the theological reflections of the post-exilic authors are an advance over the more ancient understanding of God in relation to punishment, they still fall short of what is revealed in Jesus. We refer the reader to the Introduction (pages 27-29). It seems to me that the reflection on God's justice that we find here is undermined by a basic and faulty assumption that requires us to think that God is the ultimate cause of whatever happens in our world. Thanks to Jesus we have come to see that God's power is a power of love, not control. We don't have to look for sin when a city is destroyed. They thought they had to. Watching Jesus die on Calvary reveals an essential aspect of God that otherwise would be unbelievable. If we read the story of Sodom without watching Jesus it will be an imperfect, indeed an erroneous, image of God that will be reinforced in our imaginations.

Here we have an old and separate story concerning the origin of Israel's eastern neighbours, the Moabites and the Ammonites.

Only Lot and his two daughters have escaped the destruction of Sodom. Their two husbands perished. They did not take God's warning seriously enough (see 19:14), and Lot's wife 'looked back' (19:26).

'There is not a man on earth' by whom the daughters can have children, so they do the only thing they can to ensure the survival of the family. Why else has God willed them to survive?

Their plan succeeds. The authors, who love to play with similar sounding words, link to this story the names of the Moabites ('Moab' means 'from the father') and the Ammonites ('Ben-ammi' means 'son of my kinsman') – a not too flattering connection of these neighbouring nations with incest!

For the family of Abraham's nephew new life has come out of near annihilation, and the blessing promised to Abraham is passed on through his nephew, Lot.

This brings to an end the stories about Lot.

³⁰Now Lot went up out of Zoar and settled in the hills with his two daughters, for he was afraid to stay in Zoar; so he lived in a cave with his two daughters.

³¹And the firstborn said to the younger, "Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of all the world. ³²Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, so that we may preserve offspring through our father."

³³So they made their father drink wine that night; and the firstborn went in, and lay with her father; he did not know when she lay down or when she rose.

³⁴On the next day, the firstborn said to the younger, "Look, I lay last night with my father; let us make him drink wine tonight also; then you go in and lie with him, so that we may preserve offspring through our father." ³⁵So they made their father drink wine that night also; and the younger rose, and lay with him; and he did not know when she lay down or when she rose. ³⁶Thus both the daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father.

³⁷The firstborn bore a son, and named him Moab; he is the ancestor of the Moabites to this day.

³⁸The younger also bore a son and named him Ben-ammi; he is the ancestor of the Ammonites to this day.

¹From there Abraham journeyed toward the region of the Negeb, and settled between Kadesh and Shur. While residing in Gerar as an alien, ²Abraham said of his wife Sarah, "She is my sister." And King Abimelech of Gerar sent and took Sarah.

³But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, "You are about to die because of the woman whom you have taken; for she is a married woman."

⁴Now Abimelech had not approached her; so he said, "Lord, will you destroy an innocent people? ⁵Did he not himself say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself said, 'He is my brother.' I did this in the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands."

⁶Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart; furthermore it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her. ⁷Now then, return the man's wife; for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you shall live. But if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you and all that are yours."

⁸So Abimelech rose early in the morning, and called all his servants and told them all these things; and the men were very much afraid.

Abraham, the nomad, is still on the move. Kadesh (see 14:7) and Shur (see 16:7) are at the extreme south of the Negeb (see 12:9 and 13:1,3). Gerar (see 10:19) is closer to Gaza. Abraham remains an alien in the land.

This chapter presumes knowledge of 12:10-20 where Abraham in Egypt tried to pass Sarah off as his sister. What we have here in chapter 20 is not a separate story, but an attempt to reach a deeper understanding of the implications of the traditional account already presented in chapter 12. It is a good example of how one Biblical passage comments on another. Jewish exegetes are familiar with this as are Christian scholars. It cuts across the assumptions that underpin fundamentalism.

God reproaches Abimelech. It is true he has not committed adultery, but he has offended against the rights of Abraham by taking Abraham's wife – considered to be Abraham's 'property'. The problem is much the same as that of 18:16-32: 'Lord, will you destroy an innocent people?' (20:4).

Abimelech, the Canaanite king, is portrayed as a man who acted 'in the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands' (20:5; compare Abraham, 17:1). Neither his intentions nor his action merit punishment. God admits his innocence, but tells him he must give Sarah back. This is the only time in Genesis that Abraham is called a 'prophet' (nabi), limited in significance here to Abimelech recognising that Abraham is a man who speaks with God and for God.

The fear experienced in Abimelech's court is the kind of reverential awe before God that one would expect from a faithful member of Israel. The story portrays Abimelech and his people in very positive terms. He, too, is one with whom God speaks.

Abimelech voices the kinds of questions readers have when they read the story reported in 12:10-20. The authors are making the point that Abraham's attempts to excuse himself suggest mitigating circumstances, but they do not exonerate him.

Abraham's thought that Abimelech and his people had 'no fear of God' – meaning that they might not show the kind of basic respect for aliens that one should have – is shown to be wrong. The authors of this reflection clearly have a very positive view of people who are not Israelites. This is a second point of the authors' reflection.

We hear that Sarah is Abraham's half-sister. But she is also his wife and this is what calling her his sister was meant to hide. Abraham is not exonerated for the deception.

Abimelech is extraordinarily generous to Abraham (Sarah cannot acquire property or wealth). It is not clear how this gift preserves Sarah's honour in the eyes of others. The Hebrew in verse sixteen is obscure.

Finally, though shown to have behaved wrongly, Abraham, in spite of his weakness, is still the one who intercedes with God for Abimelech. His mission to the world is not dependent on his goodness. It rests of God's graciousness alone.

It appears that the illness that affected Abimelech and his household (impotence?) was God's way of protecting him from committing the worse crime of adultery.

⁹Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said to him, "What have you done to us? How have I sinned against you, that you have brought such great guilt on me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that ought not to be done."¹⁰And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What were you thinking of, that you did this thing?"

¹¹Abraham said, "I did it because I thought, There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife. ¹²Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife.

¹³And when God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, "This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, He is my brother."¹⁴

Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves, and gave them to Abraham, and restored his wife Sarah to him. ¹⁵Abimelech said, "My land is before you; settle where it pleases you."

¹⁶To Sarah he said, "Look, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; it is your exoneration before all who are with you; you are completely vindicated."

¹⁷Then Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. ¹⁸For YHWH had closed fast all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

¹YHWH dealt with Sarah as he had said, and YHWH did for Sarah as he had promised. ²Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. ³Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. ⁴And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. ⁵Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. ⁶Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." ⁷And she said, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

The story is simply told, but we are left in no doubt that this birth is the fulfilment of God's word and God's promise, specifically in relation to Abraham and Sarah (see 17:21 and 18:10,14). The word of God does not fail (see Romans 9:6). This birth is YHWH's doing. This is highlighted here by a further reference to Abraham's 'old age' (21:2, see 17:24 and 18:11). Reflecting on this scene, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes:

By faith Abraham received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born.

— Hebrews 11:11-12

When Paul thinks of the miraculous birth of Isaac, his mind goes back to creation when God brought the universe into being where before there was only chaos, and to the resurrection of the body, when God brings new life out of death (see Romans 4:17).

Abraham names the boy. This is always the case in the writings of the Priestly School (see 16:15 and 17:19). Abraham circumcises Isaac according to God's command (see 17:12). The name Isaac has been linked already with laughter: that of Abraham (17:17), and that of Sarah (18:12), in both cases laughter born of an inability to believe. Here, finally, the laughter is one of sheer joy, and a laughter shared by all who witness the birth. 'A child has been born for us, a son given to us' (Isaiah 9:6). We think of the rejoicing of the heavenly host at the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:13).

Abraham was seventy-five when he was called (12:4). He kept believing in the promise during the twenty-five long years that he waited for this son (21:5)

The returned exiles knew the joy of a miraculous new birth when God intervened when the nation was all but dead, and, through his Messiah, the Persian king, Cyrus, made it possible for them to leave exile and see the promised land once again:

When YHWH restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
"YHWH has done great things for them."

— Psalm 126:1-2

Though there are some parallels with the earlier story of Hagar in chapter 16, this is an old and independent story. According to Abraham's age at Ishmael's birth (16:16), Ishmael should have been 15 or 16 at this stage, whereas in this story he appears to be only a small boy. It is a story of family conflict and the perils of the desert. It is also a story of God, as always, hearing the cry of the poor.

A child was normally weaned in its third year. In the days of high mortality for children, this was celebrated in the family. The first and most hazardous part of life has been successfully completed.

As in chapter 16 Sarah is jealous of Abraham's firstborn and will stop at nothing to advance her own child's prospects, as well as keep her own position. Abraham is clearly distressed. He loves his firstborn son (compare 17:18). God intervenes to persuade him to give in to Sarah's determined pressure. In obedience, he dismisses Hagar and his eldest son. God is free and is not bound by the human custom of favouring the firstborn. The line of the promise is through Isaac (this is quoted in Romans 9:7 and Hebrews 11:18).

God also promises to 'make a nation of Ishmael also, *because he is your offspring*'. Abraham's mission is not restricted to Israel (see 12:3, 17:20 and 18:18).

Abraham, in obedience to God, farewells Hagar, having prepared what food and drink she can carry. Abandoned, she wanders about in the wilderness of Beer-Sheba in the southern Negeb.

⁸The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.

⁹But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. ¹⁰So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac."

¹¹The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹²But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. ¹³As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring."

¹⁴So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

¹⁵When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, *he* lifted up *his* voice and wept.

¹⁷And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. ¹⁸Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him."

¹⁹Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

²⁰God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. ²¹He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Though the Hebrew text of verse 16 has '*she* cried and lifted up *her* voice', it would seem that the Greek Version gives a better reading. In verse seventeen God hears the cry of the boy. If the mother is weeping, so is God:

Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.

– Isaiah 49:15

God cannot fail to hear the cry of the distressed. God delivers the outcasts. This idea is at the very heart of Israel's faith, having been founded on God's deliverance from Egypt.

Though the language is different, the content is similar to 16:7. A stranger, a messenger ('angel') from God ('from heaven') comes to Hagar's aid. His words are an oracle of salvation (compare 15:1). The promise given to Abraham (21:13) is now given to Hagar.

The conclusion is striking: 'God was with the boy' (21:20). God is bigger than Israel, and while there is a special providence that comes through Isaac, Abraham's firstborn also experiences closeness to God.

Paran is west of the Arabah, bordering on Egypt. We already know that Hagar is Egyptian (16:1). She marries her son to an Egyptian.

Is there here a feeling that Egypt and Israel should be friends, 'playing together' the way they were when they were children (21:9)?

The authors include here fragments from the tradition concerning Abraham's relations with Abimelech, continuing the material left off at 20:18.

The main point of this anecdote is made clear in Abimelech's opening statement. God is with Abraham, certainly. This should flow over to dealing with his neighbours in a trustworthy way.

The problem of the use of wells could go back to an ancient tradition. Other parts clearly come from later elaboration. Verse 23, for example, has more to do with Israel's relationship with its southern neighbour. Also, throughout the scene Abraham is portrayed as being in a superior social position to the Canaanite king. He is in a position to insist that Abimelech accept his gift, thereby making a public act that binds him to accept Abraham's right to the well.

Another element to the story is an explanation of how Beer-sheba got its name. b'ēr means well, šeba' means seven and šāba' means to swear an oath.

Speaking of 'the land of the Philistines' is an anachronism. The Philistines came to Canaan in the late 13th century BC, well after the period of the patriarchs. The authors are referring to a place in the terms known to their contemporaries.

Abraham plants a tree as a memorial of the covenant – something forbidden in Mosaic Yahwism (see Deuteronomy 16:21). He prays to YHWH, called here for the only time in the patriarchal stories, 'the everlasting God'.

²²At that time Abimelech, with Phicol the commander of his army, said to Abraham, "God is with you in all that you do; ²³now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my offspring or with my posterity, but as I have dealt loyally with you, you will deal with me and with the land where you have resided as an alien." ²⁴And Abraham said, "I swear it."

²⁵When Abraham complained to Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech's servants had seized, ²⁶Abimelech said, "I do not know who has done this; you did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today." ²⁷So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant.

²⁸Abraham set apart seven ewe lambs of the flock. ²⁹And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs that you have set apart?" ³⁰He said, "These seven ewe lambs you shall accept from my hand, in order that you may be a witness for me that I dug this well."

³¹Therefore that place was called Beer-sheba; because there both of them swore an oath.

³²When they had made a covenant at Beer-sheba, Abimelech, with Phicol the commander of his army, left and returned to the land of the Philistines.

³³Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beer-sheba, and called there on the name of YHWH, the Everlasting God.

³⁴And Abraham resided as an alien many days in the land of the Philistines.

¹After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."

²He said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you."

³So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him.

⁴On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away.

⁵Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you."

⁶Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the *butcher's* knife. So the two of them walked on together.

This story is a reflection on the nature of God and on what it means to believe.

Child sacrifice was not unknown in Israel (see 2Kings 16:3; Jeremiah 7:23), as in the surrounding cultures (see 2Kings 3:27). It is important to remember that the writers and the readers of this story knew that child sacrifice was absolutely forbidden by God (see Leviticus 18:21). They knew therefore that God could not command such a thing. Abraham lived before the Mosaic Law, however, and so could be portrayed as thinking that God was asking such an obedience of him.

The opening sentence lets us know that this is a test (22:1). Abraham's obedience is immediate and unquestioning (unlike that of the Israelites in the desert). Verse 12 assures us that Abraham passed the test, showing that he 'feared God' (22:12). The only other text in the Torah that speaks of testing and fear together is Exodus 20:20: 'God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin'. 'Fear of God' in this context means obedience (as generally in the Torah).

It is the perfect test, for Abraham is being asked to give back to God in sacrifice the very one who is the only one through whom God's promise to him can be realised: 'your only son, whom you love, Isaac' (22:2). The sacrifice is to take place in 'the land of Moriah', that is to say on the site where the temple in Jerusalem will one day stand (see 2Chronicles 3:1). This is YHWH's mountain (Psalm 24:3; Isaiah 2:3; Zechariah 8:3), the place where cult is to be performed (Deuteronomy 12:5). Interestingly, the Samaritan Pentateuch locates this scene on Mount Gerizim (the site of the Samaritan temple).

He sees the place of sacrifice 'on the third day' (22:4), that is to say on the day when the judgment of God will be revealed (see especially Exodus 19:11, 15, 16). Abraham commands the others to stay behind. He is going to worship God by offering to God the sacrifice God has commanded him to make, and he must go on alone with his son. Isaac carries the wood for the fire and Abraham carries the fire and the cleaver. He is in God's hands. If help is to come it can come only from God.

Abraham's faith is being tested, his faith in God's faithfulness. Here in verse 8 is the high point of Abraham's faith. With nothing to support him except his faith, he declares: 'God himself will provide'. Here and later in verse 14, the Hebrew verb 'rā'â ('to see') is used. The English 'provide' and 'providence' come from the Latin 'providere' ('to see ahead').

It makes no sense to Abraham that God would ask him to give up Isaac, the very means that God has miraculously provided to carry out God's promises, but Abraham knows that:

My thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says YHWH.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

– Isaiah 55:8-9

We are not asked to have faith when God's will is seen by us to be reasonable. God is free. It is not for us to set the boundaries within which God must act. We are reminded of Jesus' unrelenting words:

Those who want to save their life will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake, and
for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

– Mark 8:35

To have faith is to

Commit your way to YHWH;
trust in him, and he will act.

– Psalm 37:5

It is for Abraham to listen and obey, and to believe that 'God himself will provide'. Abraham continues to obey till, at the last moment, YHWH calls him by name. Once again he is listening and ready to obey: 'Here I am' (22:11, see 22:1) – an attitude that carries over to his relationship with his son (see 22:7).

God does provide – not a 'lamb' but a 'ram'. The sacrifice was that of a father, not a son. The author and the readers have known from the beginning that this must happen for they knew God's will from the Law. Abraham had only faith to guide him. He is offered here as a model of faith. Abraham names the place as a memorial of how God, whom he recognises as YHWH because of his compassion, looked on him in his distress and reached down to save him.

7Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" **8**Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

9When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. **10**Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

11But the angel of YHWH called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." **12**He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

13And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. **14**So Abraham called that place "YHWH will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of YHWH it shall be provided."

¹⁵The angel of YHWH called to Abraham a second time from heaven, ¹⁶and said,

“By myself I have sworn, says YHWH: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, ¹⁸and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.”

¹⁹So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba.

Gifts from God must be held with open hands. The whole Abraham saga has made it abundantly clear that Isaac is the child of promise through whom Abraham will be the father of Israel and of many nations. No matter how clear we think we are as to God’s will for us, we can never contain God within our limited view. God must be free, and we will be free only when we are ready to let go even God’s gifts when we are called by God to do so. We who have known Jesus should be all the more ready to do so when we remember with Paul:

He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?

– Romans 8:32

The promises repeated here to Abraham have been repeated throughout the Abraham story from the opening verses (12:1-3, see 13:16; 15:5; 18:18). Here, as in chapter 17, the focus is on obedience. Blessing comes from God, but it requires human obedience. We have a role to play. Blessings will happen ‘because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son’(22:16), ‘because you have obeyed my voice’(22:18). In the light of the destruction of Jerusalem and the experience of the exile, the authors are stressing to their contemporaries the need for them to keep their side of the ‘covenant’. Significantly the promise this time includes victory over Israel’s enemies: ‘your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies’(22:17).

This powerful scene is, as the opening verse makes clear, a test of Abraham’s faith. At a deeper level it is a statement about God. Can we trust God to provide? It is interesting to listen to Jesus telling us how to pray. We are to pray confidently: ‘Give us today the bread we really need’(Matthew 6:11). For God will provide (see Matthew 6:25-33; 7:11; 14:13-21; Ephesians 3:20-21). We are also to pray: ‘Do not put us to the test’(Matthew 6:13). Paul reminds us:

God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

– 1Corinthians 10:13

But we must never be complacent about our faith. It is likely that if it were tested we would be found wanting. Did not Jesus ask: ‘when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?’(Luke 18:8)? It is no simple thing to really believe.

We have here an old family genealogy of Abraham's brother, Nahor. In the genealogy preparing us for the Abraham saga, it was mentioned that he married Milcah (see 11:29), and that is the last we heard of him. This genealogy picks up from the genealogy in chapter 11.

It is significant that Nahor has 12 sons, 8 by his wife, Milcah, and 4 by his secondary wife, Reumah. Milcah means 'queen'. Reumah may mean 'beloved'.

Three of the sons are known as names of tribal areas. Uz is in northern Edom (see Genesis 36:28; Jeremiah 25:20). Job is from the land of Uz (see Job 1:1-3). Buz is nearby (see Jeremiah 25:23). One of Job's 'comforters' is from there (see Job 32:2). Maacah is a region of Mount Hermon (see 2Samuel 10:6-8; 1Chronicles 19:6-7; Deuteronomy 3:14; Joshua 12:5).

Two of the other sons are linked with tribal regions. Kemuel is given as the ancestor of the Aramaeans, and the Kasdim is an Aramaean tribe (see Job 1:17).

Bethuel, the father of Rebekah will appear again in our stories (see Genesis 24:15, 25:20, 28:2,5).

The other six names are found only here and we know of no links with ancient geographical or tribal regions.

²⁰Now after these things it was told Abraham, "Milcah also has borne children, to your brother Nahor: ²¹Uz the firstborn, Buz his brother, Kemuel the father of Aram, ²²Kesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel."

²³Bethuel became the father of Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother.

²⁴Moreover, his concubine, whose name was Reumah, bore Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah.

¹Sarah lived one hundred twenty-seven years; this was the length of Sarah's life. ²And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.

³Abraham rose up from beside his dead, and said to the Hittites, ⁴"I am a stranger and an alien *living among you*; give me property among you for a burying place, so that I may bury my dead out of my sight."

⁵The Hittites answered Abraham, ⁶"Hear us, my lord; you are a mighty prince among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our burial places; none of us will withhold from you any burial ground for burying your dead."

⁷Abraham rose and bowed to the Hittites, the people of the land.

⁸He said to them, "If you are willing that I should bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and entreat for me Ephron son of Zohar, ⁹so that he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he owns; it is at the end of his field. For the full price let him give it to me in your presence as a possession for a burying place."

¹⁰Now Ephron was sitting among the Hittites; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the Hittites, of all who went in at the gate of his city, ¹¹"No, my lord, hear me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it; in the presence of my people I give it to you; bury your dead."

Chapter 22 marks the completion of the essential elements in the Abraham saga. With chapter 23 we begin the process of preparing for the handing over to the next generation. Here we have the story of the death of Isaac's mother. Sarah dies at Kiriath-arba, the old name for Hebron (see Genesis 35:37). 'Kiriath' means town, and 'arba' means four. It was at the junction of four ways.

As a stranger and an alien residing in a foreign land, Abraham had no right to land. To purchase a plot he needed to negotiate with the citizens of the town, called Hittites here. See page 115 for the names of the tribes in Canaan. The inhabitants of Hebron are called Canaanites in Judges 1:10.

With a politeness typical of the culture the citizens are more than willing to assent to Abraham's request. He can bury his wife 'in the choicest of our burial places.'

Abraham, however, goes on to tell them that he is looking for something more. He wants to possess his own plot and names 'the cave of Machpelah' as the place of his choice. Ephron, the citizen who owns the cave, 'generously' offers Abraham not only the cave but the field in which it lies. Everyone knows that the word 'give' is a euphemism. Abraham is hardly in a position to haggle.

Abraham agrees to pay and Ephron politely names an exorbitant price. Jeremiah paid 17 shekels for a field (Jeremiah 32:9). There being no written contract it was essential that the citizens witness it and that everything be spelt out clearly. Note that Abraham's words, with which they agree, do not contain the condition of burial. At last Abraham possesses a tiny piece of the Promised Land.

Jeremiah, writing at the time of the exile, also spells out a contract for land. His concluding words are significant:

Thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

– Jeremiah 32:15

The exiles in Babylon, who, like Abraham, were strangers and aliens residing in a foreign land (see 23:4), would have had to go through a procedure similar to that described in this chapter. It was no small consolation for them to identify with Abraham.

Referring in general terms to Abraham's descendants, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes:

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.

– Hebrews 11:12-13

¹²Then Abraham bowed down before the people of the land.

¹³He said to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, "If you only will listen to me! I will give the price of the field; accept it from me, so that I may bury my dead there."

¹⁴Ephron answered Abraham,

¹⁵"My lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver—what is that between you and me? Bury your dead."

¹⁶Abraham agreed with Ephron; and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants.

¹⁷So the field of Ephron in Machpelah, which was to the east of Mamre, the field with the cave that was in it and all the trees that were in the field, throughout its whole area, passed ¹⁸to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the Hittites, in the presence of all who went in at the gate of his city.

¹⁹After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah facing Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. ²⁰The field and the cave that is in it passed from the Hittites into Abraham's possession as a burying place.

¹Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years; and YHWH had blessed Abraham in all things. ²Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his house, who had charge of all that he had, "Put your hand under my thigh³ and I will make you swear by YHWH, the God of heaven and earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, ⁴but will go to my country and to my kindred and get a wife for my son Isaac."

⁵The servant said to him, "Perhaps the woman may not be willing to follow me to this land; must I then take your son back to the land from which you came?"

⁶Abraham said to him, "See to it that you do not take my son back there. ⁷YHWH, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me and swore to me, 'To your offspring I will give this land,' he will send his *messenger* before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there. ⁸But if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this oath of mine; only you must not take my son back there." ⁹So the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master and swore to him concerning this matter.

¹⁰Then the servant took ten of his master's camels and departed, taking all kinds of choice gifts from his master; and he set out and went to Aram-naharaim, to the city of Nahor. ¹¹He made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water; it was toward evening, the time when women go out to draw water.

Abraham has been 'blessed in all things'. He has one last thing to do to see that this blessing passes on to the next generation: he must arrange for his son's wedding. The basic elements of the story, that Isaac married Rebekah, and that she came from Abraham's extended family, come from the tradition. This elaboration is from the post-exilic period, in which, alone, we hear YHWH spoken of as 'the God of heaven and earth' (24:3,7; see Ezra 1:2; 5:11; 6:10).

We have already seen God's providence working in the birth of Isaac. In this account we see it continuing in his marriage.

Later we will hear of Isaac requiring the person taking an oath to touch Isaac's genitals (see Genesis 47:29). Here in 24:2,9 and there, it is a dying man calling for a very special promise. In Abraham's case it is about the handing on of life.

The authors describe the journey in terms familiar to their readers. Hence the inclusion of 'camels' (24:10), not domesticated till some time after the patriarchal era.

The story is not interested in the journey. It is covered in one verse (24:11). Journey's end is Haran (or a city close by), the 'city of Nahor' in Aram on the rivers (*nāhārîm*). Abraham set out from here on his journey to the Promised Land (Genesis 12:4).

Though the servant's thinking has more to do with magic than with prayer, these verses begin with a prayer that YHWH will show 'steadfast love' (ḥesed) to Abraham (24:12). Likewise they conclude with a prayer, praising YHWH for his 'steadfast love and faithfulness' (ḥesed we ʿemet) to Abraham (24:27).

People are going about their lives, but underneath there is a simple belief that God's providence is working to bring blessing to them (24:21).

¹²And he said, "O YHWH, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. ¹³I am standing here by the spring of water, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. ¹⁴Let the girl to whom I shall say, 'Please offer your jar that I may drink,' and who shall say, 'Drink, and I will water your camels'—let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master." ¹⁵Before he had finished speaking, there was Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, coming out with her water jar on her shoulder. ¹⁶The girl was very fair to look upon, a virgin, whom no man had known. She went down to the spring, filled her jar, and came up.

¹⁷Then the servant ran to meet her and said, "Please let me sip a little water from your jar." ¹⁸"Drink, my lord," she said, and quickly lowered her jar upon her hand and gave him a drink. ¹⁹When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, "I will draw for your camels also, until they have finished drinking." ²⁰So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough and ran again to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels. ²¹The man gazed at her in silence to learn whether or not YHWH had made his journey successful. ²²When the camels had finished drinking, the man took a gold nose-ring weighing a half shekel, and two bracelets for her arms weighing ten gold shekels, ²³and said, "Tell me whose daughter you are. Is there room in your father's house for us to spend the night?" ²⁴She said to him, "I am the daughter of Bethuel son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor." ²⁵She added, "We have plenty of straw and fodder and a place to spend the night."

²⁶The man bowed his head and worshipped YHWH ²⁷and said, "Blessed be YHWH, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master. As for me, YHWH has led me on the way to the house of my master's kin."

²⁸Then the girl ran and told her mother's household about these things. ²⁹Rebekah had a brother whose name was Laban; and Laban ran out to the man, to the spring.

³⁰As soon as he had seen the nose-ring, and the bracelets on his sister's arms, and when he heard the words of his sister Rebekah, "Thus the man spoke to me," he went to the man; and there he was, standing by the camels at the spring. ³¹He said, "Come in, O blessed of YHWH. Why do you stand outside when I have prepared the house and a place for the camels?"

³²So the man came into the house; and Laban unloaded the camels, and gave him straw and fodder for the camels, and water to wash his feet and the feet of the men who were with him. ³³Then food was set before him to eat; but he said, "I will not eat until I have told my errand." He said, "Speak on." ³⁴So he said, "I am Abraham's servant. ³⁵YHWH has greatly blessed my master, and he has become wealthy; he has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels and donkeys. ³⁶And Sarah my master's wife bore a son to my master when she was old; and he has given him all that he has. ³⁷My master made me swear, saying, 'You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I live; ³⁸but you shall go to my father's house, to my kindred, and get a wife for my son.'

³⁹I said to my master, 'Perhaps the woman will not follow me.' ⁴⁰But he said to me, 'YHWH, before whom I walk, will send his angel with you and make your way successful. You shall get a wife for my son from my kindred, from my father's house. ⁴¹Then you will be free from my oath, when you come to my kindred; even if they will not give her to you, you will be free from my oath.'

The fact that Rebekah's home is called 'her mother's household' and the actions of her brother, Laban, are clear indications that her father, Bethuel, is dead.

Once again the blessing of YHWH is prominent (24:31,35), as is the prosperity that is seen as a sign of this blessing (24:35). Abraham's wealth has passed on to his son, Isaac (24:35). The story assumes that Abraham has died. The account of his death is held over to the following chapter.

Before eating, the servant begins to recount the purpose of his travel: he has been sent by Abraham to find a wife for Isaac (24:40).

This repetition is typical of stories that are told to be listened to, not read.

As throughout this whole narrative, trust in divine providence is apparent.

YHWH is present throughout the scene guiding everyone so that his blessing will be upon all: 'He guides me along the right way' (Psalm 23:3).

He asks from Laban the same loyalty (*hesed*, 24:49) that he asked earlier of God (24:12,14 – where *hesed* is translated 'steadfast love').

It is clear that the inclusion of 'Bethuel' in verse 50 is a scribal error.

In verse 51 the focus is not so much on what God has said as on what God has done. Hebrew *dābar* is as much deed as word. Laban recognises that God has spoken in the events that have unfolded.

⁴²"I came today to the spring, and said, 'O YHWH, the God of my master Abraham, if now you will only make successful the way I am going! ⁴³I am standing here by the spring of water; let the young woman who comes out to draw, to whom I shall say, "Please give me a little water from your jar to drink," ⁴⁴and who will say to me, "Drink, and I will draw for your camels also"—let her be the woman whom YHWH has appointed for my master's son.'

⁴⁵"Before I had finished speaking in my heart, there was Rebekah coming out with her water jar on her shoulder; and she went down to the spring, and drew. I said to her, 'Please let me drink.'⁴⁶She quickly let down her jar from her shoulder, and said, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels.' So I drank, and she also watered the camels.

⁴⁷Then I asked her, 'Whose daughter are you?' She said, 'The daughter of Bethuel, Nahor's son, whom Milcah bore to him.' So I put the ring on her nose, and the bracelets on her arms. ⁴⁸Then I bowed my head and worshiped YHWH, and blessed YHWH, the God of my master Abraham, who had *guided* me by the right way to obtain the daughter of my master's kinsman for his son.

⁴⁹Now then, if you will deal loyally and truly with my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, so that I may turn either to the right hand or to the left."⁵⁰Then Laban and Bethuel answered, "The thing comes from YHWH; we cannot speak to you anything bad or good.

⁵¹Look, Rebekah is before you, take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master's son, as YHWH has spoken."⁵²When Abraham's servant heard their words, he bowed himself to the ground before YHWH. ⁵³And the servant brought out jewelry of silver and of gold, and garments, and gave them to Rebekah; he also gave to her brother and to her mother costly ornaments.

⁵⁴Then he and the men who were with him ate and drank, and they spent the night there. When they rose in the morning, he said, "Send me back to my master." ⁵⁵Her brother and her mother said, "Let the girl remain with us a while, at least ten days; after that she may go." ⁵⁶But he said to them, "Do not delay me, since YHWH has made my journey successful; let me go that I may go to my master." ⁵⁷They said, "We will call the girl, and ask her." ⁵⁸And they called Rebekah, and said to her, "Will you go with this man?" She said, "I will."

⁵⁹So they sent away their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham's servant and his men. ⁶⁰And they blessed Rebekah and said to her, "May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads; may your offspring gain possession of the gates of their foes." ⁶¹Then Rebekah and her maids rose up, mounted the camels, and followed the man; thus the servant took Rebekah, and went his way.

⁶²Now Isaac had come from Beer-lahai-roi, and was settled in the Negeb. ⁶³Isaac went out in the evening to walk in the field; and looking up, he saw camels coming. ⁶⁴And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel, ⁶⁵and said to the servant, "Who is the man over there, walking in the field to meet us?" The servant said, "It is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself. ⁶⁶And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done.

⁶⁷Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

Only now that he has related the purpose of his mission and how he has been guided by YHWH is the servant ready to enjoy the hospitality offered him by Laban. He is keen to report back, and, Rebekah agrees to accompany him.

Verse 62 comes as a surprise: 'Isaac had come from Beer-lahai-roi'. We will see later that when Abraham dies Isaac returns to Beer-lahai-roi and settles there (see 25:11). Beer-lahai-roi is the name of the well where Hagar received a message from YHWH. It is associated with the birth of Ishmael (see 16:14).

Is there a hint here that Sarah's death has opened up an opportunity for reconciliation with Hagar? This suspicion is reinforced later by the fact that in the story Ishmael and Isaac stand together at their fathers' burial (Genesis 25:9).

Rebekah veils herself. A bride was veiled in the presence of her bridegroom prior to the wedding.

Verses 66 and 67 presume that Abraham is already dead (compare 24:35).

This whole scene is an encouragement to the returned exiles (and to us) to live reflective lives, so as to recognise the presence and action of God guiding them (and us), too, 'by the right way' (24:48).

This is the only time Keturah is mentioned. Is she introduced here to link Abraham with these tribes from the Syro-Arabian desert? Her name recalls the incense rising from a sacrifice – incense that came to Judah from Arabia. The Rabbis suggested that Keturah may be Hagar.

Of her six sons, the name Shuah appears in Job 2:11 in reference to a tribe in the Edom-Midian area. Midian may denote a geographical region rather than a tribal group (see 37:36). The other four names occur only here and are otherwise unknown. For Sheba and Dedan see 10:7, where they are named as sons of Ham.

Verses 5-6 are inserted into the genealogy to ensure the unique position of Isaac,

Abraham dies 100 years after his entry into Canaan (see 12:4). He left his home never to return. He left trusting in a Promised Land that he never possessed. He experienced it only as a foreign stranger, trusting that his descendants would one day enjoy it as their own.

He is buried in the cave that he purchased for the burial of his wife, Sarah (Genesis 23). His first-born Ishmael and Isaac bury him and Isaac settles in Beer-lahai-roi. This is the place of the well where God appeared to Ishmael's mother, Hagar (16:4). One is left with the impression that the brothers are living together happily.

In any case it is important to observe that, in spite of the bitterness and rivalry between their mothers, nowhere in the Genesis record is there any indication of bitterness or rivalry between the sons. God has chosen Isaac as the heir to the promise, but the Bible record is sympathetic to Ishmael and his mother.

¹Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. ²She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah.

³Jokshan was the father of Sheba and Dedan. The sons of Dedan were Asshurim, Letushim, and Lemmim. ⁴The sons of Midian were Ephah, Ephher, Hanoch, Abida, and Eldaah. All these were the children of Keturah.

⁵Abraham gave all he had to Isaac.

⁶But to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, while he was still living, and he sent them away from his son Isaac, eastward to the east country.

⁷This is the length of Abraham's life, one hundred seventy-five years. ⁸Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. ⁹His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, ¹⁰the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried, with his wife Sarah.

¹¹After the death of Abraham God blessed his son Isaac. And Isaac settled at Beer-lahai-roi.

¹²These are the descendants of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's slave-girl, bore to Abraham.

¹³These are the names of the sons of Ishmael, named in the order of their birth: Nebaioth, the firstborn of Ishmael; and Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, ¹⁴Mishma, Dumah, Massa, ¹⁵Hadad, Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah.

¹⁶These are the sons of Ishmael and these are their names, by their villages and by their encampments, twelve princes according to their tribes.

¹⁷(This is the length of the life of Ishmael, one hundred thirty-seven years; he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people.)

¹⁸They settled from Havilah to Shur, which is opposite Egypt in the direction of Assyria; he settled down alongside of all his people.

Here is another list of Arabian tribes that, by means of the genealogy, are linked with Abraham. 'Descendants' translates *tôl'dôt*.

Nebaioth is mentioned again in Genesis 28:9 and 36:3. Isaiah 60:7 refers to the 'rams of Nebaioth'.

Kedar merits frequent mention (Isaiah 21:16-17, 42:11, 60:7; Jeremiah 2:10, 49:28; Ezekiel 27:21; Psalm 120:5; Song of Songs 1:5; 1Chronicles 1:29). Likewise Tema (see Isaiah 21:14; Jeremiah 25:23; Job 6:19; 1Chronicles 1:30).

The text highlights that Ishmael had 12 sons, all princes. This was promised by God in 17:20.

Verse 17 parallels the account of Abraham's death and burial in 25:7-8.

Verse 18 stretches from east to west across the Arabian peninsula, from Havilah on the Persian Gulf (see Genesis 2:11, 10:7, 10:29; 1Samuel 15:7; 1Chronicles 1:9, 1:23) to Shur, an Egyptian outpost (Genesis 16:7, 20:1; Exodus 15:22; 1Samuel 15:7, 27:8).

This concludes the Abraham Narrative.