

II. Abraham Genesis 12-17



1. Abram's Call (Genesis 12:1-9)

Genesis 12:1-3

'YHWH said to Abram, "Go from your country and your birthplace and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I 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."

As Paul says: 'Abraham is the father of all of us' (Romans 4:16)

From the outset we are told that Abraham's wife, Sarai 'was barren; she had no child' (Genesis 11:30).

Paul reflects that the Lord is the God 'who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist' (Romans 4:17).

The author of the Letter to the Hebrew comments: 'Abraham received power of procreation even though he was too old – and Sarah herself was barren'(Hebrews 11:11).

As the authors of Genesis set out 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 the 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.’**

Genesis 12:4-9

So Abram went, as YHWH had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram 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, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then 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. From 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. And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

2. Abram in Egypt Genesis 12:10-20

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. 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. If the pharaoh thinks Sarai is Abraham's wife he will kill Abraham and take her 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 Sarai 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)? The situation is saved by the LORD who sends a plague.

3. Abram and Lot separate Genesis 13

Abram leaves Egypt, passes through the Negeb and arrives near Bethel. ‘There was strife between the herders of the livestock of Abram and the herders of the livestock of Lot [Abram’s nephew]’ (13:7).

Then Abram said to Lot, “Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herders and my herders; for we are kindred. Is 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.” (13:8-9)

Lot chooses the Jordan plain,
which left Abram in ‘the land of Canaan’ (13:12).



S. Bois

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Genesis 13:14-18

‘YHWH 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; for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring **forever**. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you”. So 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.’

‘God granted the inheritance to Abraham through the promise.’

(Galatians 3:18)

4. Campaign of the 4 great kings Genesis 14:1-16

Local kings engaged in battle. Lot is taken prisoner. Abram defeats the kings and rescues Lot.

5. Melchizedek Genesis 14:17-24

‘King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. He blessed Abram and said, “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!” And Abram gave him one tenth of everything’(14:18-20).

6. The Divine Promise Genesis 15

Genesis 15:1-6

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

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.”

He 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.” And he believed YHWH; and YHWH reckoned it to him as righteousness.’

(quoted Galatians 3:6 and Romans 4:3)

Genesis 15:7, 18 - Promise of Land (see 12:7; 13:15)

‘Then YHWH said to him, “I am YHWH who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess” (15:7).

‘On 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’ (15:18).

7. Hagar and Ishmael, Sarai and Isaac

Genesis 16-17 (continued 21, 24, 25)

The Hebrew Scriptures present God as making a special covenant with Abraham, and choosing to overturn cultural expectations by achieving his purpose, not through his firstborn son, Ishmael, but through his second son, Isaac.

Abraham was the father of Ishmael and Isaac.

The people of Israel came from the blessing given by God through Isaac.

The Arab peoples came from the blessing given by God through Ishmael.

A careful reading of the Hebrew Scriptures clearly shows that God's choice of Isaac did not involve a rejection of Ishmael. Abraham never rejected Ishmael; nor did God. On the contrary God blessed Ishmael in a special way.

Genesis 16:1-4

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, and 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. So, 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. He went in to Hagar, and she conceived.



Genesis 16:4-6

When Hagar saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. Then 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!” But Abram said to Sarai, “Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please.” Then Sarai dealt harshly with her (the way Egypt was to deal with Israel!), and she ran away from her.

Sarah gives her servant to Abraham, but is envious when she conceives, and ‘deals harshly’ with her, so Hagar runs away (Genesis 16).

Genesis 16:7-9

The angel of YHWH (YHWH's messenger) found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And 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." The angel of YHWH said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her."

Genesis 16:10

"The angel of YHWH also said to her: "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.

There are echoes here of the Promise made earlier to Abraham: 'Look toward heaven and count the stars. So shall your descendants be' (Genesis 15:5).

Genesis 16:11

The angel of YHWH said to her: “Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael [‘God has heard’], for YHWH has given heed to your affliction.”

Genesis 16:12-16

“He 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.” So 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?” Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi (‘the well of the one who lives and sees’); it lies between Kadesh and Bered. Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, **Ishmael**. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

Beer-lahai-roi will appear later in the story (Genesis 24:62).

Genesis 17:1-8

‘When Abram was ninety-nine years old, YHWH appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my **covenant** between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, This is my solemn commitment to you: You shall be the **ancestor of a multitude of nations**. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be **Abraham**; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my solemn commitment between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an **everlasting** commitment, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And 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.’

Genesis 17:9-14 Circumcision (P)

17:9-10

God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised”.

Genesis 17:15-17

‘God said to Abraham, “As for Sarah your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but **Sarah** shall be her name. I 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.”

Then 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?”

Genesis 17:18

‘Abraham said to God, “O that Ishmael might live in your sight”.

When God promised Abraham that Sarah would bear him a son, Abraham pleaded: ‘O that Ishmael would live in your sight’ (Genesis 17:18). God replied: ‘As 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. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac’ (Genesis 17:20-21). The ‘twelve princes’ parallel the twelve sons of Jacob.

There is an echo here of God’s first words to Abraham: ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I 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’ (Genesis 12:1-3).

Genesis chapter 17:19-21

‘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.

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

Genesis 17:22-27

All males are circumcised. Abraham is 99 and Ishmael is 13.

While the Hebrew Scriptures are clear that God made a special covenant with Abraham, and that God chose to overturn cultural expectations by achieving his purpose through Abraham's second son, Isaac, as the child of promise, this in no way replaced the covenant made with Noah in which God expressed God's commitment to all the peoples of the earth.

Furthermore, the choice of Isaac did not involve a rejection of Abraham's firstborn son, Ishmael, nor of the Arab peoples. Abraham never rejected Ishmael; nor did God. On the contrary God blessed Ishmael in a special way.

Genesis 17:20

As 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.

Note the echo in God's commitment to Ishmael of God's first words to Abraham: 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing ... In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Genesis 12:1-3).

The 'twelve princes' echo the twelve tribes of Israel.

We will return to Ishmael and Isaac in the following presentation