

Abraham

"The Lord said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'"

Genesis 12: 1-3

While the region of Mesopotamia was becoming the religious cesspool of the ancient world, God had designated his servant and his territory in the world of that time through an obscure Babylonian called Abram.

When Shem, Noah's eldest son, was a hundred years old, two years after the Flood, his wife had a son in the Mesopotamian region of Chaldea whom she named Arphaxad. The genealogical statement that Shem lived 500 years after the Flood implies that he was still alive when Abram was still a young man, as were his son, Arphaxad and his grandson Salar. Nahor, the seventh direct descendant from Shem was the father of Terah, the grandfather of Abram, so Abram would have been well acquainted with details of the personal as well as the historical events of the period from Noah onwards.

During the family's occupation of this territory the descendants of Shem had also built great cities—Elam, Ashur, Mari, Ur and Nahor —and devised their own distinctive philosophies, cultures and religious practices. But the ancestral line from Eber, grandson of Arphaxad, through his son, Peleg, was unique in that it sought to preserve ancient beliefs in observing the commands of God—“*El Elyon*”—from Adam through to Noah and since. The history of Abram really began “*in the days of Peleg*”, when Abram's father, Terah, moved from Ur of the Chaldees in Babylonia to Haran further south.

In the human time-span of that period Methuselah was contemporary with Adam for almost 300 years, with Enoch for 450 years. Lamech, his son, died five years before the Flood, and Methuselah died in the year of the Flood. Noah lived 350 years after the Flood, and died only two years before Abram was born. Shem lived for 502 years after the Flood, that is, in Biblical chronology approximately until 1846 BC. From Noah to Abram was ten generations, and the birth of Abram is reckoned to have taken place around 1996 BC. Shem, therefore was still living in the time of Abram for some 150 years. So was the infamous Nimrod, but at the end of his notable reign of imperial domination.

Abram's forebears were part of the earlier Babylonian dispersion (“*the earth was divided in the days of Peleg*”), the members of his family moving first to the city of Ur. There the family were rich and powerful enough to figure in the Mari and Assyrian documents of the time, as cities were named in their honour in this area—Terah, Nahor, Haran, Peleg, Serug and others. The city of Ur was only about 140 miles from Babylon, in the vicinity of the Persian Gulf, and was famous for its vast Temple of the Moon. where Nimrod, or Ninus, had appointed his daughter as high priestess of the moon-god, Nannar, and the moon-goddess, Nin-gal. These were probably the “*false gods*” that Abram's father, Terah, worshiped, so Abram was probably also an idolater. It was said in Scripture that “*Terah, the father of Abram and Nahor, lived beyond the river and served other gods.*”¹²

It was in this idolatrous and sophisticated metropolis of the ancient world that the voice of God came to Abram, to initiate His

¹² Joshua 24: 2

Third Covenant with His creatures since Adam in Eden. Abram was one of three sons of Terah, one of whom, Haran, had died, and there was nothing to distinguish him from other pagan families worshipping gods of that place and time. Haran's two children, Lot and Sarai, lived with Terah's household, and Abram married Sarai.

Abram probably had a rudimentary knowledge of a monotheistic God from his forbears since Noah, but his daily experience would be with the pagan and commercial practices of the time. In other words, he was neither "*just*", "*blameless*" nor "*walking with God*" like Noah. He was also in his seventies, so why would God choose him out of all other possibilities? Why not a superlative high priest like Melchizedek already living devoutly in Salem in Canaan? The only possible reason is that Abram was the only person who was prepared to believe that the voice addressing him was in truth the voice of God and he was prepared to act on it.

Theologically, a possible reason was because God wanted his kingdom of heaven on earth to be based primarily on faith, because later Scriptures affirmed "*Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him for righteousness*"; whereas Melchizedek was a priesthood product of traditional righteousness by his inherited monotheistic practices. Melchizedek's ancestry is not known, so it can only be speculated in the hindsight of history that Abram, like others in the lineage of Jesus comprising the kingdom of God, was already in the purpose of God "*before the foundation of the world*" because of his willingness to act on his belief that God spoke to him.

However, Abram had become so accustomed to living in an extended family setting that, when the voice of God told him to leave Ur, he naturally assumed it meant the extended family. That was his first mistake among several, for God said very distinctly, "*Leave your country, your relatives, and your family, and go to a country I will show you . . .*"¹³ God's *Third Covenant* was to be *only with Abram, and the family to be born to him*—including the "*great nations*" of Ishmael and Esau, to be blessed in turn because of their *family association with Abram*. The other members of Terah's family, with their idolatrous beliefs and materialist ambitions, were not part of God's cosmic plans.

¹³ Genesis 12: 1

The reasons were evident when, having accepted Abram's insistence on leaving Ur at God's command at the age of seventy-nine they persuaded him to stop at Haran, two days' journey to the south-east. It was just far enough, they calculated, to satisfy Abram and his new God, and was still near enough to return to Ur when Abram's sudden inexplicable inclination might come to an end. God's words had left a deep enough impression on Abram for him to stay away from Ur, but not enough impression for him to fully respond to the challenge. The Hebrew God had said to him:

*"I will make of you a great nation, I will bless you and make your name so great that it shall be used in blessings: Those that bless you I will bless, those that curse you, I will execrate. All the families on earth will pray to be blessed as you are blessed."*¹⁴.

This was a remarkable statement by any standard. God's six-fold promise to an obscure seventy-nine year old semi-pagan included: (i) making Abram great; (ii) making him the father of a great nation; (iii) making him the source of blessing to other nations of the world; (iv) making him the standard by which others would be judged; (v) making him the envy of all other nations; and (vi) making his name divinely acceptable in invocatory prayers. All of this without a single aptitude or connection to make it likely quite apart from possible.

Abram remained in Haran for five years, and only moved on when Terah, his father, died. Abram had learned his first important lesson: that this new God has no further interest in an individual who does not immediately obey *exactly* as commanded. If Abram did not put God before family, God would not fulfil His six-fold *Covenantal* promises as listed.

Abram left Mesopotamia and travelled several hundred miles to Canaan, and at a place called Shechem, he came face to face with the God who, until then, had been only a voice. This was a "*theophany*", or Son of God in angel form, sometimes designated "*the Angel of the Lord*". There the Angel of the Lord promised Abram, "*I give this land to you and your descendants*"¹⁵. From Shechem, where the meeting occurred, Abram moved on to between Ai and Beth-el, meaning "*House of God*", and there he built an altar on the spot to

¹⁴ Genesis 12: 2,3

¹⁵ Genesis 12: 7

memorialize the meeting with, and the promise of, the speaking God.

It was from this region and circumstances that the people known as Hebrews (probably offspring of Eber) emerged. From the descendants of Noah his grandson, Canaan, together with his eleven sons and their families and clan associates, had moved southwards to the coastal plains north of Mount Carmel, and became known as Sidonians after the name of Canaan's firstborn son.. Sidon's ten brothers spread throughout the region and it became known in time as "*Canaan*". They brought with them from Sumer the knowledge of gods and priesthoods, myths and mysteries, as well as irrigation, cultivation of wheat and barley, herding livestock, building houses, making pottery for eating and drinking vessels, metal tools and weapons for war. There were probably only about 100,000 inhabitants from mixed tribes living in the land of Canaan when Abraham arrived there from Babylonia.

The region of Canaan to which God had directed Abram was strategically located between the two great centres of ancient civilization, Mesopotamia and Egypt; and Canaan at the time already had notable regional cities such as Jericho, Hebron, Dothan, Beersheba, Bethel, Ai, Sodom and Gomorrah. The most dominant early occupants of Canaan were the Amorites, descendants of Canaan¹⁶, pushing southwards from Mesopotamia, whose most illustrious king was Hammurabi—king, re-builder and law-maker of Babylon.

The Egyptian ruler, Sinuhe, was suspicious of the Amorite expansion in the region, and he also pushed into Canaan to subjugate the territory occupied by minor tribes and kings. There were other invasions by the expanding empires of the Hyksos and the Hittites, Phoenicians and Philistines, and all of them left occupiers who appropriated lands and established garrisons on Canaan's strategic Mediterranean coast, the central highlands, and the plains.

The land of Canaan was small, about 150 miles from north to south and about 50 miles from the Mediterranean coast to the River Jordan, in all about 10,000 square miles. The hill country between

¹⁶ Genesis 10: 16

the Jordan Valley and the Maritime Plain was the most important and coveted region because of its fertile land and strategic value as a “land-bridge” between east and west, and north to south of the early world’s geographical heartland. The city of Jezreel, at the entrance to the two valleys of Jezreel and Esdraelon, and the mountain pass of Megiddo forty miles away, were the critical targets of both invaders and defenders. To the north, the mountains of Hermon rose to a height of some 10,000 feet; and, to the south, the Jordan Valley reached its lowest point at the Dead Sea, about 1,275 feet below sea level.

After he left Ur of the Chaldees at the command of God, and when he arrived in Canaan, Abram had only three permanent things in his life: a tent, a testimony, and a tomb. Unlike his nephew, Lot, who moved from living in a tent to living in a house in the city of Sodom, Abram lived in a tent until the day he died. In his divinely approving epitaph God would say of him that *“he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents . . . for he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God”*.¹⁷

What divinely designed and built visionary city had Abram been shown by God in Canaan that so consumed him he had no interest in an earthly home or earthly city? Had God shown him the heavenly Jerusalem that He would also show to Moses and to David to reproduce on earth? The *“city with foundations”* that Abram sought was still hidden from others in the mystery of God’s will to be revealed at the right time. Abram’s residential testimony was demonstrated in the altars that he built; first on entering Canaan, and his response to God when told later to offer up his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice. When Abram died, all he owned in Canaan, despite the spoken *Covenant* of God, was his tent, his righteous testimony and the tomb in which he buried Sarah and himself¹⁸.

On his arrival in Canaan he visited Salem (which would become Jerusalem) and met with Melchizedek there. Melchizedek was the noted priest of the remnant of the old and preserved form of monotheistic worship handed down from Adam through Enoch to Noah to Eber—the father of the race of *“Hebrews”* who was still alive

¹⁷ Hebrews 11: 9-10

¹⁸ Genesis 14: 1-24

in the time of Abram. The belief in the “Most High God”, *El-Elyon*, whom Melchizedek served, had been brought by the migrating Semites from Mesopotamia. When Abraham presented Melchizedek a tithe, or a tenth, of his plunder taken from his defeat of the kings who had captured Lot, it was an acknowledgment of God’s prior rights in Canaan above those of Satan through the Amorites and others. The response offering of bread and wine by Melchizedek to Abraham was a recognition and validation of the rights of Abram to possession of Canaan in the name of God.

Following his meeting with Melchizedek in Hebron some thirteen years after God announced His *Covenant* to him, God spoke to Abram again concerning His purpose in the world. It is recorded “*The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision . . .*”¹⁹. This vision involved a number of differing states of consciousness: *awareness* (5-11), *deep sleep* (12), and *nightmare* (12):

“Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be. I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.”

“Sovereign Lord”, Abram said respectfully, *“how can I know that I shall gain possession of it?”* It was the first recorded instance of Abram having a dialogue with God

At the time, Abram was around ninety years of age, childless, and his wife, Sarai, had been barren for a lifetime. He did not doubt God’s promise, but he was conscious that Noah had been given a purged world for an inheritance, and in ten generations it had been disastrously corrupted, as had the ten generations from Adam to Noah. So he probably wondered how God was going to safeguard His kingdom and His people.

“Bring me a heifer,” God said, *“a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon”*.

Abram complied with God’s command, and prepared them for sacrifice as part of the custom of treaty ratification, *“cutting a covenant”*. He cut the animals in two, and arranged the halves opposite each other, but did not cut the birds. As he waited for God to reappear, vultures circled overhead. At the end of the day God

¹⁹ Genesis 15 v 1

had still not appeared, and Abram fell into a deep sleep, disturbed by a heavy sense of foreboding. The immense historical importance of this solemn *Covenant* transaction between God and Abram has been lost or ignored in attributing the episode only to a nightmare instead of an actual experience. God introduced this awesome real and historic experience with the spoken words, “*Do not be afraid, Abram; I am your shield, your very great reward*”.²⁰ (my emphasis)

Abram was a very courageous man. It had not caused him any fear to go to the rescue of his nephew, Lot, with only 318 men “*born and trained in his own household*” against a well-armed host led by five kings—and he defeated the superior force, and released Lot. But God anticipated Abram’s fear from what God was about to cause him to experience in this second stage of His historical *Covenant* with him. That fear, that reverential awe, was a necessary part of the vision to balance the glories of the promise it also contained. It was not just an announcement about a family due to receive a son in remarkable circumstances; it was not just about a great nation to arise from that family in unique historical contribution; it was not just that other nations of the world would wish to emulate them in their divine inheritance. *It was God’s chosen people in God’s chosen kingdom about to be established on earth*; it was God’s redemptive purpose about to be unfolded to and through this seed and family and nation and kingdom; it was God’s glory of person and nature about to be committed to men and women, and ultimately, His Son, so that His will would be done on earth as it was in heaven; it was nothing less than taking a kingdom of God on earth and transforming it into a kingdom of men in heaven to share in eternal rule and glory. No wonder Abram was afraid!

If the vision was fearful, the experience was terrifying: “*a thick and dreadful darkness came over him.*” The combination of anticipation, delay, premonition, darkness and trance/nightmare induced in Abram a horror of something terrifyingly implacable as he prepared himself for some negative elements of God’s purposes in the future.

Then God spoke to him again:

“*Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and ill-treated four hundred*

²⁰ Genesis 15: 1f

*years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterwards they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In **the fourth generation your descendants will come back here**, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.²¹* (my emphasis)

Abram realized it was not just a dream but a conscious experience when a smoking fire-pot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the physical pieces of the sacrifices he had prepared earlier. The sense of overwhelming terror, the impenetrable darkness, the predatory carrion, the premonitory anticipation, the fire and smoke, were all to emphasize the importance of the details of the divine *Covenant*. He inferred from the experience that there was an obverse aspect to the grace of God, a price to be paid that was the incalculable suffering involved as well as immeasurable blessing consequent upon disobedience of the divine will expressed in the *Covenant*. Above all, God was addressing him as a trusted intimate of His cosmic purposes and all that he, Abram, was being asked was to be a willing instrument.

So God gave to Abram in his *Covenant* with him a three-fold prophetic promise: (i) to punish the enslaving country “*not your own*”, Egypt; (ii) to provide prosperity; and (iii) the Promised Land of Canaan. The *Covenant* sacrifices Abram had just prepared, and God had confirmed as divinely acceptable, were representative of Abram’s seed, Israel-to-come. The national destiny of the people of God would involve terror and darkness, plundering nations and exile and slavery and fires of judgment. Yet in and through them all would be the brooding and preserving presence of God “*passing between the pieces.*”

The final words of God were emphatic and geographically definitive:

“To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.” (my emphasis)

²¹ Genesis 15: 13-16

Abram had never heard of a God who left the heavens to appear in visions and to make His desires known to human creatures in direct dialogue, or who would listen to any direct representation from a human who was not an ordained priest. This God was an—impossible—to comprehend—Deity, yet one who excited Abram with His limitless possibilities. Such a God could just as easily break through the veil of visions and dreams and step into the real world to speak face to face with His creatures, and Abram could not wait for the experience to be repeated.

Meanwhile, he informed his family, servants, and companions, of his God and His promises. They were polite, but they did not believe Abram or his God. They viewed Abram as an endearing eccentric: leaving his home and country and inheritance for the unsupported promise of being the founder of a foreign dynasty; the father of a divinely chosen and fashioned nation; an historical destiny to influence nations across the world; a divine mission to bring all men and women everywhere to a knowledge of and companionship with God—after a period of slavery in and deliverance from an unspecified country four hundred years hence. This was too unique a God to believe.

Abram's wife, Sarai, felt she had been patient and loyal enough, and she suggested to Abram that while he waited for his God to miraculously provide them with a son in her old age he should take her maid, Hagar, and have a child with her. Abram agreed, Hagar became pregnant, and she began to taunt Sarai with her barrenness. This infuriated Sarai, who now blamed Abram for ever having consented in the first place, and she demanded that he get rid of pregnant Hagar. Abram told Sarai to do whatever she felt like doing, and Sarai threw out the pregnant Hagar.²²

However, as Hagar was resting at a spring in the desert, God appeared to her in the form of an angel, or theophany, and told her to return to her mistress, Sarai, adding,

"I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count. You are now with child and you will have a son. You will name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard of your misery. He will be a wild donkey of a man, his hand will be against everyone and everyone's

²² Genesis 16: 1ff

hand against him, and he will live in hostility towards all his brothers”.

Hagar returned to Sarai, and when her son was born Abram gave him the name Ishmael which God had commanded. While Abram waited for his promised son to be born of Sarai he pondered on all that the God-man had said to Hagar at the spring in the desert. The same promise of being a numerous, if not great, nation had been given to Ishmael; but, with it, had been the promise of endless fighting between the members of the future families and nations. How would his unique God fulfil the blessedness of His promises with such opposition to His chosen people?

Abram was eighty-six years old when Ishmael was born, and it was another thirteen years before God appeared to him again, this time, Abram noted with interest, not in a vision but in a theophany, as God-man standing in front of him as He spoke, to reaffirm His promise in a greatly expanded and more explicit form:

“This is my covenant with you. You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram (meaning “exalted father”), your name will be Abraham (meaning “father of many”), for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.

“As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household, or bought with money from a foreigner — those who are not your offspring . . . My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant

“As for Sarai, your wife, you are to no longer call her Sarai; her name

*will be Sarah (meaning “princess”). I will bless her and surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her”.*²³

It was too much—even for Abram. At ninety-nine years of age he was being asked now to cut off a half-inch of skin from his penis, and to change a letter of his wife’s name, and two letters of his own, in exchange for a promised glittering destiny hereafter. Was he being asked to believe that the fate of the world hung on the foreskins of a few people? He laughed, and said to himself, “*Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarai bear a child at the age of ninety?*”

But he said nothing of this to God. Instead he pleaded, “*If only Ishmael might live under your blessing?*”

Here the faith of Abraham faltered; the not-promised son, Ishmael, at hand was better than the promised son-only son later. God did not strike him down for such temerity. To the contrary, God promised that Ishmael would also be divinely blessed, because he was also “from your loins”, and he would also father twelve tribes who would become a great nation, but not partakers in the divine Covenant of the Promised Land through Isaac.

“All right. But your wife Sarai will still bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac, for I have heard you. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year”.

So Abraham circumcised himself and all the males of his household as God had commanded, also changing his own and Sarah’s names. Later, as he sat in some discomfort in the door of his tent, thinking over what God had said to him regarding Isaac and Ishmael, and their different destinies, he became aware of the approach of three strangers, of distinctive appearance. Although apparently human they all had the same quality of radiance that had distinguished the appearance of the theophany who had just

²³ Genesis 17: 1ff

addressed him in God's name. Also, they had not appeared walking from a distance, but had simply appeared in the shadow of the tree in front of him. Abraham thought with increasing excitement that his unique God was possibly revealing even more of His power and presence to him in this unexpected manifestation. He got to his feet, and approached the three figures standing silently beneath the tree, and bowed to them, and said: to the one who was more imposing than the others;

"If I have found favour in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant".

"Very well", he was told. *"Do as you say"*. Abraham was fascinated. Was it possible that heavenly creatures could eat and drink the same as human beings?

"Quick," he said to Sarah and the awe-struck servants, who were watching the imposing strangers from inside the tent, *"bake some bread"*. He took a young calf, and prepared a meal, with fresh curds and milk, and brought it to where the three strangers sat under the tree, and served them with absorbed attention while they ate. It was obvious to Abraham that, while each of them spoke with authority, only one of them was addressed as *"Lord"*. It was this one who now spoke to Abraham:

"Where is your wife, Sarah?" he asked Abraham.

"There, in the tent", Abraham pointed to where she stood in the shadow.

Lifting his voice so that she could hear him, the God-figure said, *"I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah, your wife, will have a son"*.

A smile passed across Sarah's still beautiful but now aging face, and she said to herself incredulously, *"After I am worn out and my master is old will I now have this pleasure?"*

Abraham was unaware of her thoughts, but the God-figure said sharply to him,

"Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I

am old?'. Is anything too hard for the Lord? I repeat, I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son".

Sarah, stunned that her innermost thoughts were known to the stranger, was afraid and said, *"I did not laugh"*.

"You did laugh", the God-figure said abruptly, and Sarah was silent.

The three strangers rose to their feet to take their leave, and Abraham indicated that he would walk a little way with them. Although he had a thousand questions to ask Abraham maintained a respectful silence. He wanted to see, above all, if they would disappear as suddenly as they appeared. The most imposing of the three strangers, as if reading Abraham's thoughts, said to him:

"Shall I hide from you what I am now about to do? You will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations will be blessed through you. For I have chosen you, so that you will direct your children and your household after you to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, and so that I will bring to pass what I have promised you. The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If so, I will know".²⁴

The other two strangers moved on ahead, but the God-figure stopped to talk further with Abraham. Abraham was greatly disturbed by what he had just heard from this strange God—who looked and walked and talked and ate like a man—and he decided from what he had learned in the past forty years about Him that he could challenge Him to explain Himself. He asked with concern:

"Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the judge of all the earth do right?"

It was an amazing outburst which he had not planned, but the

²⁴ Genesis 18:1ff

thought of this new God being like the unpredictable gods of other nations with their irrational judgments had outraged him beyond caution. He stopped in sudden awareness of his rashness. But if this was his Creator, and if what the ancients said of His creatures being given dominion by the Creator over the earth, then he was responsible to act as such. The God-figure did not seem perturbed by Abraham's response:

"If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake", he conceded.

Abraham gazed at him thoughtfully. He might never have another opportunity to get to know God at first-hand. How much mercy would this inscrutable God show on request?

"Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am but dust and ashes," he said slowly, "what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?"

"If I find forty-five there I will not destroy it", he agreed.

"What if only forty are found there?" Abraham asked.

"For the sake of forty I will not do it", the Lord replied.

Abraham took a deep breath. *"May the Lord not be angry with me, but permit me to ask: "What if only thirty can be found there?"*

"I will not do it if I find thirty there".

Abraham found it difficult to breathe. *"What if only twenty can be found there?"*

"For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it".

"One more request", Abraham pleaded quietly: "What if only ten can be found there?"

"For the sake of ten I will not destroy it", the God-figure assured Abraham.

Abraham was silenced at last. The Judge of all the earth had done right, in his view. More than that, He had discussed His judgement with His creature, and had been shown to be understanding as well as merciful beyond Abraham's expectations. If He were prepared to withhold punishment from Sodom for the sake of a possible ten righteous individuals it must be because He knew there were not even ten there that He was on His way to execute judgement now.

The Lord God returned to heaven, Abraham returned to his tent and daily tasks, and the two angelic strangers went on to Sodom to enact judgement on the corrupt city. They appeared to Lot, who had moved into the city from the plain, but they did not accept Lot's invitation to enter his home, saying curtly that they preferred to remain in the streets of the city. However, as Lot insisted, they finally agreed to enter his house, ate a meal, and lay down to sleep.

News of the arrival of the two remarkable strangers had spread, and the men of the city came to Lot to demand that the two visitors be handed over to them for sexual enjoyment. Lot protested vigorously to no avail. He even offered his two daughters in place of the two visitors, but the men of the city wanted more perverse pleasures. As they sought to enter Lot's house by force the angelic visitors struck them with blindness, and ordered Lot and his family to leave the city immediately. With Lot and his family gone the angelic visitors called down fire and brimstone on the city in divine judgment.

Lot and his family were not righteous by any standard, and could well have come under the same judgement for the evil they tolerated, but it is said that "*God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the city*". The apparently reckless pleas of Abraham on behalf of Sodom had so impressed God that He was willing to exercise clemency on behalf of a morally questionable Lot and his eight-member family.

When Abraham was a hundred years old Sarah gave birth to a son— "*at the very time God promised him*"—and called him Isaac as God had stipulated. In his birth Isaac was both a triumph and a disaster for Abraham and Sarah as parents. On the day of celebration of Isaac's weaning, Sarah claimed she saw Ishmael mocking him and

she demanded of Abraham, *“Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son, Isaac”*²⁵

Sarah was guilty on at least four counts in her response: (i) she was unreasonably jealous of Hagar, which led her to condemn the 14-year-old Ishmael’s action; (ii) she herself was responsible for taking Hagar as a maidservant from Egypt, and for proposing the liaison with Abraham to produce Ishmael; (iii) she knew that God had already returned Hagar and the child to Abraham’s family responsibility on the previous occasion she tried to get rid of them; and (iv) she implied that Ishmael was Abraham’s son, while Isaac was hers—*“my son, Isaac”*, not *“our son”*.

Abraham did not agree with Sarah’s attitude: *“The matter distressed Abraham greatly, because it concerned his son”* But God assured Abraham, however wrong Sarah might have been in her judgement and response she was right in that Ishmael must be separated from Isaac in the line of succession. Abraham, out of sentiment and weakness, had refused to accept the necessary consequences of his own self-willed action in conceiving Ishmael. In order to be an approved servant of God it was necessary for Abraham to put God before country, before family, before wife and before children.

That the family was important God had demonstrated time after time: He had delivered Lot from Sodom, had preserved the pregnant Hagar, had looked after Sarah in Egypt, and had provided for Hagar and Ishmael. But at the same time He had made it abundantly clear that the primary element in the family was God Himself. Abraham was righteous before God, Abraham was a friend of God, Abraham was uniquely obedient to God, but his chief virtue as a chosen instrument of God in his own time was that he must learn to be a fit *“father”*—whether to his own family or to the nations who would spring from his loins. That was why God had changed his name from Abram—meaning *“exalted father”*, which he had acquired as a misled pagan in a distant land—to Abraham, meaning *“father of many nations”*, as the founding Patriarch of Israel, a role model for fathers everywhere.

²⁵ Genesis 21 v 10

Isaac was about twenty years old when God appeared to Abraham again to teach him his greatest lesson in fatherhood: namely, that his offspring belonged to God and not to himself or to Sarah: God said to Abraham:

“Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about”²⁶.

This command from God must have caused Abraham shocking bewilderment as well as anguish, for several reasons. First of all, there was the utter senselessness of the act, after all that God had said regarding multiplying his offspring into a great nation, etcetera; there was the meaningless death after twenty years and having to start over again; there was the dismaying similarity with the child sacrifices to the pagan deities of the heathen nations around; and, finally, there was the outrageous violation of God’s own statements regarding the value and taking of human life, with its consequences. Abraham did not see a single qualifying virtue in the demand for his son, Isaac’s, sacrifice.

Further, where was Sarah when God appeared with this demand? She was present when the Angel of the Lord appeared to announce Isaac’s birth; why was she not present to hear the news of his required death? Was it because God knew she would never agree, whatever the divine rationale? Or was it because God was once again affirming the responsibility of the husband and father to make the family decisions and to take the ultimate responsibility? Whatever the explanation, God draws a veil over the scene—although He would record for posterity His approval of Sarah’s acceptance of Abraham’s role even in Isaac’s death sentence: *“Sarah called Abraham lord”*.

Isaac did not know he was to be the sacrifice on the way to Mount Moriah, but, at twenty years of age, he had to submit willingly to his aged father when they reached the place of sacrifice and he had to take his place on the altar. For such total submission to be acceptable to the adult Isaac, Abraham must have communicated to him his own deep faith in God, and the belief that the God who had

²⁶ Genesis 22: 2

created life in the dead womb of Sarah in giving him birth would somehow create life from death in the pending sacrifice. For Isaac was not only dumbly obedient to his father in these extreme circumstances, he was a willing participant who believed in his father's God. This is evident from the fact that God honoured Isaac later by having as one of his divine names, "*the Fear of Isaac*"²⁷. Isaac would have an undistinguished life other than this act, but he would be remembered for ever as one of the God-approved patriarchal trinity, "*the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*".

It was never God's intention to have Abraham sacrifice Isaac. This is obvious from the detailed record of Scripture, where God waits until "*Abraham reached out his hand to slay his son*" and then He intervened at that moment with the words: "*NOW I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son*"²⁸. There was a moment in time when Abraham, with knife uplifted, was mentally ready to slay Isaac as God had requested, and at that moment God knew Abraham totally believed and "*feared*" Him. Abraham had learned the final lesson of fatherhood: namely ***God came before family***. He could only conclude that God's lesson for him was to know the value God set on obedience. Abraham, in "*fear and trembling*" was now fit to be the role model of all fathers in history.

Abraham's acceptability to God did not lie in the *performance* of the command of God, incredible as it seemed, but in the demonstrated ***willingness to obey in his heart***: The Scripture records God saying clearly: "*NOW I know . . .*" and "*Because you have done this...*" There was a moment in time when Abraham mentally decided to do the deed, believing that God would raise Isaac or another son. In this act of commitment to God above family, God once more confirmed His ***Covenant*** with Abraham and a prominent role in ruling the nations:

*"I swear by myself that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all the nations of the earth will be blessed, because you obeyed me"*²⁹ (my emphasis)

²⁷ Genesis 31:42

²⁸ Genesis 22:10-12

²⁹ Genesis 22:16-18

None of these *Covenant* promises were fulfilled in Abram's lifetime. He was made no richer in Canaan than in Ur; he was given a son, Isaac, and, later, other children; he was held in high esteem by contemporary rulers in Canaan; but he did not own a square foot of the land when he died—except the tomb for his body. Yet he died content, with his divinely-promised family. He is regarded as father of the Children of Israel; he is honoured by Jews and Christians and Moslems, the world's three great religions. Above all, he was acknowledged by God as "*my friend*". Yet he died without seeing a single *Covenant* promise fulfilled.³⁰

Chapter 3

will be available on this site on the 1st April 2011

³⁰ Hebrews 11:13