

GOD'S DEALINGS WITH ABRAM

The Call of Abram (Genesis 11.27b-12.9)

11.27b-29 'Terah begat Abram, Nahor and Haran, and Haran begat Lot. And Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his nativity, in Ur of the Chaldees. And Abram and Nahor took wives for themselves, the name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and the father of Iscah.'

Like Noah (5.32), Terah has *three* sons, seen as a sign of completeness. The detailed information given in this section is typical of the Ancient Near East as introductory to the covenant that follows. It stresses the importance of Abram

Haran dies comparatively young, but before he dies Haran begets Lot. The mention of Lot here is because he represents Haran in the family. The seed has not died out. Haran's daughter Milcah marries Nahor. We have no further mention of Iscah, but the mention here demonstrates a good knowledge of the family records.

The names of Terah, Abram, Nahor and Haran can all be paralleled in the area in the third and second millennium BC. (Not of course as representing these individuals but as typical names of the period).

It is quite clear that the family home is Ur of the Chaldees. The family are not just semi-nomads wandering from place to place, they are inhabitants of Ur, although probably even at this stage with large herds and flocks. Ur of the Chaldees was an important and highly sophisticated city of ancient origin, where the brothers would have access to a good education.

But they were probably not full city-dwellers as such. Ur's principal deity was Nannar, the moon god, who was also worshipped at Haran, and probably worshipped by Terah. This worship in fact included a number of degrading elements which Abram would have found disturbing. The description 'of the Chaldees' was probably added much later to identify which Ur it was (there were a number of Urs - for Ur means 'city').

There is clear evidence that in Ur there was a belief in the afterlife. In the royal 'death pits' servants had gone into these royal burial places, had taken up their positions and had then drunk poison from cups, sometimes golden ones. This could only have been because they were expected to serve their masters in the life to come. But we must not read too much into this. We do not know what kind of 'life' they expected and there is no specific mention in the patriarchal narratives of such a belief.

It is interesting that details of Nahor's wife's relationship are given and not those of Sarai even though later she is described by Abraham as 'the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother' (20.12). This again may have been in order to emphasise that Haran was fruitful even though he died comparatively young. Or it may be because Sarai was barren. While it is clear later that Sarai is an outstandingly beautiful woman, she bears the shame of unfruitfulness. Rebecca, the later wife of Jacob, was descended from Milcah (22.20-24).

The inter-marrying suggests a sense of exclusiveness, confirmed when a wife is sought for Isaac from within the 'family'. Sons of Terah could not just marry anybody. Such marriage practises are confirmed elsewhere.

Later narrative (31.53), where the God of Abraham is distinguished from the god of Nahor

(Yahweh was not 'the god of their father'), suggests that Nahor continued to worship his father's gods (see also Joshua 24.2). He was not affected by his brother's conversion.

We note that Ur of the Chaldees was destroyed around 1950 BC. This therefore points to the fact that these events took place before then. Possibly God's command to Abram was also a warning of what was to come on Ur.

11.30 'And Sarai was barren. She had no child.' The matter is stated quite starkly to explain why no information is given as to Abram's seed. Abram and Sarai stood out from the others in that they had no children, which in those days was a matter of great grief and shame. It also caused problems in the matter of inheritance (15.3). It is quite possible that this was seen by his family as being the result of Abram not worshipping the family gods. But the writer clearly has future events in mind. The starkness here brings out the wonderful joy when this is at last remedied.

11.31 'And Terah took Abram, his son, and Lot, the son of Haran, his son's son, and Sarai, his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees to go into the land of Canaan. And they came to Haran and dwelt there. And the days of Terah were two hundred and five years. And Terah died in Haran.'

The repetition of detail is typical of ancient narrative. The description of Sarai is interesting. Not Terah's daughter but his daughter-in-law. She was childless! How deeply this was felt. Not even her outstanding beauty could make up for that. Alternatively it may stress her status, not just a daughter but the wife of Abram. Haran is well attested to as an ancient city existing well before this time and being on a regular trading route.

We do not know what caused Terah to determine to go to Canaan. Was it the constant urging of his son Abram who had received a divine command (12.1)? But when they arrived at Haran Terah decided to stay. Perhaps it was too nice a place to leave, or perhaps it resulted from his zeal for the moon god. So he exercised his authority as 'prince' of the family. Thus they settled down there and made it their home to such an extent that it was later looked on as their motherland (24.4; 29.4).

We are not told at this stage what Nahor did, but certainly later he is found at Haran. The writer is not concerned with the motives and doings of Terah and Nahor. His thoughts are centred on Abram. For the covenant around which the document is written (12.1-3), which is the reason for the writing of the record, is with Abram.

'And the days of Terah were two hundred and five years. And Terah died in Haran'. Such is the detail of Terah's life. He bore children and he died. He never reached Canaan, never even realised what he was missing, - to be a part in the greatest adventure of all time, the beginning of the long history of salvation, and to miss out. How easy it is to fail to recognise our opportunity! But the days in Haran were beneficial to Abram for he established his independence and built up his own family tribe and wealth (12.5). When it seems to us that God's plans for us have come to a stop we must take the opportunities that are on our doorstep.

12.1-3 'And Yahweh said to Abram, "Leave your country and your kinsfolk, and your father's house, for the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, and you be a blessing. And 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 will be blessed".'

This is the first appearance of Yahweh to Abram of which we learn, and it is spoken as matter of fact, without introduction. We are not told how Abram had come to know of Yahweh, but

possibly we are to recognise that he would come to know Him from the family records, Genesis 1.1 - 11.27a. Later appearances draw attention to the awesome nature of these experiences that Abraham has with God.

We note again at this point that all the records which are pieced together in the account of Abram's dealings with God are built around covenants. They are covenant records, and only incidentally history. Thus they would be recorded in writing immediately as evidence of the covenant with Yahweh. (We do not have a 'life of Abraham', we have a record of covenants in which Abraham was involved. This is why so much is missing from his life story. This is also why knowledge of Isaac's life is so limited. He did not have the experiences with God that Abraham had).

It is easy through familiarity to fail to recognise the stupendous nature of these experiences of Abram. Here was a man, in a family where other gods were prominent, who had established himself semi-independently, and was now experiencing an awe-inspiring theophany which would determine his whole future. The whole of what has gone before has been leading up to this.

We must not have the wrong idea about Abram. He was already a prince of his own family tribe, well-to-do and with many servants (12.5). He would not be going alone, for his family tribe would go with him. But he was called to leave his family and all his ties, for only then could he establish an exclusive community of Yahweh, (the first 'church'). It required faith - no longer would he enjoy the protection of the larger tribal connections and the place ahead was unknown - and obedience, for the decision lay with him and with him alone. Sometimes much is required of one to whom much will be given.

'Leave ---- for a land that I will show you'. He is called to venture into the unknown. The way ahead will be revealed to him as he takes the path of obedience. His part is to trust and obey. What a crucial moment this is in his life. It will determine his whole destiny. Indeed it will determine the destiny of the world.

God does not hold back on what is being demanded. It is spelled out clearly. He must leave his land, to which by now he has become tied by a sense of belonging. He must leave his kinsfolk, those whom he knows so well and has relied on so often. He must leave his position in the family hierarchy, his father's house, those who are most important to him. The thoughts are progressive.

But in return he is promised what every man dreams of. He is to enjoy a new land. He will become 'a great nation'. He will experience God's special protection. He is to become 'a blessing'. Indeed the whole earth will be blessed through what he does, or rather what God does through him. The ideas are in parallel. He must leave a land to receive a land. He must leave kinsfolk in order to become part of a great nation. He must leave his close family so that all the world might become his family. This is God's covenant. Obey, he is told, and you will receive abundantly and flowing over. And Abram believes and obeys.

It was against all natural common sense. Surely his opportunity to become a great nation lay in inheriting his father's position over the combined family sub-tribes? But God knows that unless he breaks free he will not be truly free, for always he will be held back by tradition, connections with his father's gods and responsibility to others. Only when he has fully broken free to become master of his own destiny will he be able to receive and to offer the fullness of blessing. When God chooses a man He strips him of all that could prevent his usefulness. But sometimes we are not willing to let go. Abram was willing to let go.

'I will make you a great nation'. This thought is prominent in all the promises to Abram. He

will have many descendants, and in 17.5-6 (compare 17.20) the promise is expanded to become 'nations' (see 13.16; 15.5; 17.5 on; 18.18; 22.17; 26.4, 24; 28.14; 35.11).

'Make your name great.' There is a deliberate contrast here with those who went to Babel (11.4). They went out from their family background to make themselves a name, but it ended in miserable failure, for they built what was only temporary, and they brought division to the world which would only result in further misery. Abram will build what is permanent, which will result in blessing. He builds no city but what he builds, a household of faith, will be a blessing to the world. The choice the world always faces is spelled out clearly here. God or mammon? The 'pleasures of civilisation' or joy in God? It is where the heart is that really matters.

'Be a blessing'. The covenant is full of blessing. Blessing for Abram. Blessing for his friends. Blessing for the world. Abram is to be the earthly source of that blessing. He is not given the narrow view of seeking to achieve blessing for himself. He is to seek to *be* a blessing. And as he does so he will be blessed himself. What a contrast this is with those who sought to build 'civilisation' only for their own ends.

'I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse.' There is a deliberate contrast between the plural and the singular. His friends will be many, his enemies few. But enemies he will have for he seeks to serve God and this will always result in those who react to such an attitude. But Abram is assured that God will be watching over his relationships and acting accordingly.

12.4 'So Abram went as Yahweh had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy five years old when he left Haran.'

Abram obeyed the voice of God. Lot, his nephew also went with him. It is very probable that through Abram's witness Lot too had begun to worship Yahweh. It is possibly difficult to comprehend what a major step for Abram this move was. To the ancients membership of the tribe was a sacred duty and to leave it was to dismember the tribe. But Abram has the call of Yahweh and his act is therefore a declaration of faith.

Abram's age at leaving (seventy five) indicates according to the Hebrew text that Terah was still alive when he left. Terah was 'seventy' when he begat Abram (11.26). Seventy plus seventy five (12.4) is one hundred and forty five. Terah died at two hundred and five. Thus he would live for another sixty years.

However we have already seen that the 'seventy' indicates a divinely perfect birth and the seventy and five here may suggest the divinely perfect time (seven intensified) plus five (the covenant number). It is explaining why Abram acts at this point in time. Thus the numbers may not be intended as literal numbers. Furthermore the Samaritan Pentateuch gives Terah's age on death as one hundred and forty five. It thus sees Abram as leaving Haran on the death of his father. This is the tradition known to Stephen in Acts 7.

(The Samaritan Pentateuch, comprising the five books of Moses, is a separate and very ancient tradition of the Hebrew text, which, with a few particular alterations, was preserved by the Samaritans).

12.5 'And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls they had obtained in Haran, and they went out to go into the land of Canaan, and into the land of Canaan they came.'

The repetitive phrases at the end are in typical Ancient Near Eastern style. They confirm that

what they purposed to do, they did, unlike Terah earlier.

It is clear that Abram has built up a family sub-tribe since arriving in Haran. He was a man of substance and he has increased his wealth and obtained servants of his own. He has had this moment in mind, and the time had now come to act. Lot too is a man of substance, with his father's wealth handed down to him. Later their joint substance is so great that they have to separate (13.6), and Abram is able to field 318 fighting men 'born in his house' for battle (14.14).

12.6 'And Abram passed through the land to the place of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. And the Canaanite was then in the land.' The arrival at Shechem (a very ancient city) is mentioned because it is here that Abram will have his first meeting with Yahweh in the land.

'The oak of Moreh' may be intended to indicate an oak forest (compare 13.18 and Deuteronomy 11.30). Alternately it may refer to a particularly famous oak, possibly with religious connotations. Indeed the particular oak may have been called that precisely because it was there that God met Abram, and there that he built the first altar to Yahweh (verse 7 compare 35.4; Joshua 24.6).

Shechem was under the control of the Hivites (33.18-34.2). This is drawn to our attention by the phrase that 'the Canaanite was then in the land'. Hivites were seen as 'Canaanites', and had associations with Lebanon (Genesis 10.17; Judges 3.3; 2 Samuel 24.7). Thus 'the Canaanite was then in the land' is probably not a phrase written long after, looking back, but is one pointing out that *by this time* Shechem was Canaanite. It had previously not been so. The presence of people called Canaanites in the area is mentioned for the first time around this time in external documents. Thus the writer has an intimate knowledge of the recent history of Canaan.

Some take the other view in which case we have a typical explanatory note of the kind often introduced into records as an updating comment, without changing the narrative. But the former explanation is more likely. Whichever way it is it cannot be used to date the whole record.

12.7 'And Yahweh appeared to Abram and said, "To your seed I will give this land." And there he built an altar to Yahweh who appeared to him.'

This is the first theophany (awesome experience of God) received by Abram in the land. It confirms that he has now arrived at the place to which God has sent him. This land is the land promised to him, the land that God would show him (12.1). This is a postscript to the earlier covenant. This also confirms our above view about the mention of the Canaanite presence. The mention is ominous. It is the Canaanites who will need to be dispossessed by Abram's descendants.

'He built there an altar'. Noah had also built an altar to celebrate the ending of the flood (8.20). The altar would be built of earth for the purpose of offering a burnt offering in gratitude to God. We are not to read into it the later complicated sacrificial system. The offering is predominantly an act of worship. But it reminds us that man's approach to God must be through the death of another. As head of the family tribe Abram would be its priest.

12.8 'And he removed from there to the mountain on the east of Bethel ('house of God'), and pitched his tent, having Bethel to the West and Ai to the East. And there he built an altar to Yahweh and called on the name of Yahweh.'

Abram is surveying the land and finding places for his herds and flocks to feed. But wherever

he goes he does not forget the public worship of God.

'Called on the name of Yahweh'. A technical term for Yahweh worship (see 4.26). Abram is announcing to his family tribe that Yahweh is now the God of the land. The writer's mention of the two great walled Canaanite cities (both well attested) is deliberate in order to emphasise Abram's claim even in the face of these walled cities. It is an act of faith. He does not doubt that God can deal with the walled cities.

It is not said that he 'called on the name of Yahweh' at Shechem. That was more of a temporary altar, built because of the covenant confirmed there. That was a more personal act of worship. This one is more important and is recognised as the primary altar for worship by the tribe at this time.

To Abram there is only one God. He is Yahweh, the Creator of all things and Judge of all the earth (18.25, compare 13.13 where Sodom's sins are said to be 'against Yahweh'). He is confident that Yahweh can work His will wherever He wishes, even in mighty Egypt (12.10-20). He rarely needs to deal with the question of the gods of others. When he meets Melchizedech king of Jerusalem he is ready to accept that El Elyon, 'the Most High God', maker of heaven and earth, is the same as Yahweh, for that is what he knows Yahweh to be (14.22). The same is true of El Shaddai, 'God the Almighty' (17.1) and El 'Olam 'the Everlasting God' (21.33). For to him Yahweh is all. But this is because the descriptions fit Yahweh, not because he is prepared to equate Him with any god. He is not primarily a syncretist.

'Pitched his tent'. The use of tents is paralleled by the "seventeen kings who lived in tents", mentioned in a later Assyrian inscription, and the first of whom is referred to at Ebla (3rd millennium BC). The Amorite tent dwellers of the earlier myth of Martu, and references in the Tale of Sinuhe (c.1950BC) also confirm the use of tents at this time.

12.9 'And Abram journeyed going on still towards the Negev.'

The Negev was the Southern highland, sloping southward between Hebron and Beer-sheba, the southernmost part of Canaan, and very suitable for grazing. Abram has now passed through the whole land, surveying it in Yahweh's name, and seeking pasture. It is his new home. Archaeology testifies to the occupancy of this area by peoples similar to Abram around this time. The route taken by Abram also fits in with what we know of such people from this period, keeping to the hills and avoiding the great cities in the coastal plain.

Adventure in Egypt, Increasing Wealth, Separation from Lot, God Confirms His Covenant (12.10-13.18).

This section is to be seen as a whole leading up to the final covenant (13.14-17). It reveals God's watch over Abram in all circumstances, and stresses that Yahweh's power reaches even into Egypt. Pharaoh was believed to be the earthly manifestation of a god, but he is shown as having no protection against Yahweh. The account helps to explain how Abram and Lot became so rich in herds that they had to separate.

12.10 'And there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was sore in the land.'

It is clear that by this time Abram has been some time in Canaan. A severe famine occurs there. Canaan was always vulnerable to famine because it was so totally dependent on rain, so Abram makes for Egypt as would many others with herds to protect. Egypt exercised general control over the area over this period. There is no suggestion of blame here about his going to

Egypt. On the contrary the writer justifies Abram on the grounds of the severity of the famine.

The well known mural painting of Beni-Hasan, dated about the year 1892 BC, portraying a visit to Middle Egypt by a small caravan of travelling Semitic smiths and musicians, provides background to this incident.

But this must have been a real test to Abram's faith. The land that God has brought him to has failed and he must leave it at least for a time. He needs some special reassurance of God's care and he receives it in what follows.

Because of the Nile, which overflowed its banks seasonally and kept the ground well watered, Egypt was usually protected from the worst aspects of famine, although, rarely, they did happen even there, and we know from external records that people often sought refuge in Egypt at such times and were accepted in (compare also 26.2; 41.54 on; 43; 47.4). Abram's intention was only to stay as long as was necessary.

As with much of the narrative it reads as though Abram were almost on his own, but it is commonplace in ancient literature to depict the activity of a group in terms of its leader unless there is an intention to make a specific impression (compare e.g. 1 Kings 14.25; 2 Kings 12.17; 16.9). The action here is centred on Abram and Sarai, those who are with him, including Lot (but see 13.1), are unimportant to the narrative.

12.11-13 'And it happened that when he was on the verge of entering Egypt he said to Sarai his wife, "Look now, I know that you are a very beautiful woman. And when the Egyptians see you they will say 'this is his wife', and they will kill me and save you alive. I beg you, say you are my sister so that it may be well with me for your sake, and that my soul may live because of you.'"

Sarai's beauty must have been exceptionally outstanding for Abram to have this fear, for he would have had his retainers with him. But he has clearly heard rumours about the way Egyptians sometimes treated 'foreigners' and her beauty fills him with apprehension.

The Egyptians undoubtedly despised foreigners and saw themselves as 'men', and foreigners as mere 'humans', until they learned to speak Egyptian. Abram had nothing to judge the Egyptians by except hearsay for he knew nothing about Egypt except for what he had been told, but he knew that they were a powerful nation and famine would have left him and his retainers somewhat weak and frail. They were after all coming to beg for help.

Furthermore we learn later that this habit of describing Sarai as his sister was a policy he had settled on long before when he first 'left his father's house' (20.13). The statement was true in terms of those days. She was in fact his half-sister (20.12). In fairness to Abram it must be recognised that while this was undoubtedly because he was concerned for his own life he also has in mind Sarai's safety. He no doubt thought that if men killed him for his wife, his wife would become their plaything. But if they saw the opportunity of wooing Sarai respectably they may well treat Abram well with a view to a respectable marriage, giving them the opportunity to move on in safety.

The plan may have worked well elsewhere but here it misfired. What he could not have foreseen (because he was not familiar with great kings and their ways) was the policy of Pharaoh to have men constantly on the lookout for beautiful women for his harem.

12.14-15 'And it happened that when Abram had arrived in Egypt the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful, and the princes of Pharaoh saw her, and praised her to Pharaoh and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house.'

The description fits well with what would be expected to happen in a case like this. It bears all the marks of genuineness. First the Egyptians in general begin to praise her beauty, and the word gets around. Then the princes of Pharaoh, always eager to win his favour, would hear about her and have her appraised. Then she is 'taken into Pharaoh's house'.

This does not mean that Pharaoh ever saw her. He had many harems and she was taken into one of them. There would then be a period of preparation in which this 'barbarian' could be fitted for her position after which she would be offered to Pharaoh. It is clear, however, that Abram is respected enough as a petty prince to have her treated properly.

'Pharaoh.' The title of the king of Egypt. It derives from the Egyptian term for 'great house' and originally signified the palace and court of the king. The first known use of the king himself is around 1450 BC. Some time after the time of Moses it began to be connected with the actual name of the Pharaoh. Thus we may see the use here as being probably the work of Moses, changing an original 'king of Egypt' into the more modern title.

12.16 'And he treated Abram well for her sake, and he had sheep and oxen and he asses, and menservants and maidservants, and she asses and camels.'

Great kings were often not ungenerous when a beautiful woman was involved. Here he was dispensing favours, and the courtiers would be well instructed in the matter. These gifts were of course supplied by Pharaohs' princes on his behalf. Pharaoh himself would not get involved in such a matter until the woman was presented to him. The gifts show that Abram was respected and the certainty the princes had of Pharaoh's satisfaction. They were munificent as became a Pharaoh. They explain how Abram so quickly became rich enough to have to separate from Lot. Notice the stress on the expansion of his herds and flocks.

Camels were a comparative luxury at this stage but there is no question but that the privileged had them. Camels are attested in a cuneiform tablet from Alalah (18th century BC), a kneeling camel figure from Byblos (19th century BC), a 19th century BC text from Ugarit and a Middle Bronze Age tomb at Nablus (1900 - 1550 BC), as well as at other places. Figurines of camels have been found at Al-Ubaid, also at Uruq, Lagash and in Egypt. Camel bones and teeth have been found in Palestine (1700 B.C.). When Abram wishes to impress his far off relatives it is camels that he sends (24.10).

But the size of his 'household' was also increased. Many more men now served under him. His power and effectiveness was thus extended.

12.17 'And Yahweh plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues, because of Sarai, Abram's wife.'

Presumably Pharaoh must have visited the particular palace where Sarai was in the harem and some dreadful illness clearly ensued there. Enquiries would then be made as to new arrivals to explain the problem, and diviners would be consulted. God may have spoken to them as he later spoke to the soothsayer Balaam. Certainly in some way they learned the truth about Sarai.

It is even possible that Abram or one of his servants might have arranged for the news to reach the ear of someone influential. He must have been devastated at what had happened and not have known what to do about it. But when news of the illness in the palace reached him he may have seen it as a God given opportunity, and acted. Alternately Sarai may have communicated the message to someone influential in the harem and spoken of what Abram's God would do in the light of the circumstances.

However to the writer the most amazing thing was that Yahweh could afflict Pharaoh. Pharaoh was a distant and fearful figure not easily approached even by Egyptians, a god, and one of whom to be afraid. But the incident demonstrates to him that the gods of Egypt are no match for Yahweh. His power is clearly all embracing. This is one of the main lessons of the account.

12.18-20 'And Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this that you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say 'she is my sister'. Now therefore here is your wife. Take her and leave." And Pharaoh gave men charge concerning him, and they brought him on the way, and his wife, and all that he had.'

The words aptly bring out the superior status of Pharaoh. There is no discussion. Indeed the message would probably be conveyed through servants, although it is possible that, in the circumstances, he might have been brought into the presence of Pharaoh with all the preparations that that would entail (compare 41.14 which simplified a more complex requirement).

It is clear that whatever the illness was it was sufficient to awe Pharaoh enough to prevent him taking revenge on Abram. Rather than punish him he wants this man with his powerful God to be well out of his way. Pharaoh the god is afraid of Yahweh. There is the specific idea here that Abram was at fault. The writer does not attempt to hide the fact. But he also wants the reader to know that Pharaoh is afraid.

So Abram is escorted to the frontier and firmly ejected from Egypt. But he is allowed to take his gifts with him. In the writer's eyes the superiority of Yahweh is recognised by Pharaoh so that he acts accordingly.

13.1 'And Abram went up out of Egypt, he and his wife, and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the Negev.'

The sentence confirms immediately that Abram had been accompanied by his family tribe and by his nephew. They return to the Negev, to the land that God had promised Abram.

13.2 'And Abram was very rich in cattle, in silver and in gold.'

This is said rather triumphantly. The contest with Pharaoh has been to his benefit. We are surely to see that this great wealth is at least partly due to his visit to Egypt. Rather than destroying him it has enriched him, and this can only have been because Yahweh was with him. The mention of silver and gold suggests that Abram engaged in trading as well as having possession of flocks and herds.

13.3 'And he went on his journeys from the Negev, even to Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning between Bethel and Ai, to the place of the altar which he had made there at the beginning, and there Abram called on the name of Yahweh.'

Relieved and full of praise in his heart to God for his preservation Abram takes his tribe back to the cult's altar, and there he leads the tribe in worship. At this stage Bethel (the area not the city) is clearly looked on as their permanent 'home', in as far as a tribe, whose main activity was herding, and who thus had to continually seek pasturage, could have a permanent home.

This establishes that Abram and his family tribe are now semi-nomads. They make some place their centre but move out from that place to pasture their flocks and herds. They must seek places where there is water. At times they must seek higher ground. When the fields in the lowlands have been harvested they can, by agreement, pasture their flocks on the stubble. At

the same time, as we shall see later, they are not averse to planting crops and to some extent settling down. Thus they must remain within touch of civilisation, for cities are built where there is a good supply of water, and fields are usually sown where there are men to eat its produce, and civilisation has much to offer in the way of culture and education. Yet they avoid becoming too involved and they stay away from places where they will not be welcome.

13.5-6 'And Lot also, who went with Abram, had flocks and herds and tents. And the land was not able to bear them that they might dwell together, for their substance was so great that they could not dwell together.'

The riches gathered in Egypt have altered the situation. There is no longer room for both sub-tribes to stay together. This begins to cause friction between the two sub-tribes. The land is just not sufficient. They must seek wider pastures.

13.7 'And there was strife between the herdmen of Abram's cattle and the herdmen of Lot's cattle. And the Canaanite and the Perizzite dwelt then in the land.'

Part of the problem is caused by the presence of others, for they must share land with Canaanites and Perizzites. Thus what is available causes tension as each group seeks to look after their own master's interests. This leads Abram to the only possible decision. They must separate. This dissension cannot be allowed to go on, for if it does it may flare up into something more serious.

13.8-9 'And Abram said to Lot, "Let there be no strife, I beg you, between me and you, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen. For we are close relatives. Is not the whole land in front of you? Separate yourself, I pray, from me. If you will 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".'

The greatness of Abram is brought out in these words. As senior, and almost certainly leader of the largest sub-tribe, he could have claimed precedence. But he wants no rancour between them. He is happy for Lot to choose which way to go and then he will take the other. There will be no hard feelings. They are still bound together as close relatives, but they must consider the facts of the situation. It is therefore regrettably necessary for them to separate. Abram trusts in Yahweh to ensure that he will end up in the right place.

13.10 'And Lot lifted up his eyes and saw all the Circle of Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere before Yahweh destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, like the garden of Yahweh, like the land of Egypt as you go to Zoar.'

Lot carries out his research carefully (he could not do this by literally just 'looking up'). He travelled around and weighed up the opportunities. And as he stood in the hills and looked down over the Jordan and its surrounds and saw how well-watered and fruitful the plain was, the Circle of Jordan, with the Jordan running through it, and fed by other rivers, he was impressed. Later this area would become spoiled by salt and bitumen, but at this time it was fair to look at and enticing. He did not take anything else into consideration, especially the fact that he was leaving Canaan the land of promise.

'As you go to Zoar', that is in the direction of Zoar, which is at the tip of the Dead Sea as it is after the destruction of the cities.

There is a link in this verse with Genesis 2 and 3, for it is 'like the garden of Yahweh' with its great lifegiving river; also with chapter 19, where we learn of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; and with the land of Egypt, watered by the Nile, and fruitful. The reference to Egypt refers us back to the previous chapter. They have just seen the wonder of that land

abundantly watered by so great a river. Here is a land that appears its equal.

The other two references show that this chapter is to be seen in a wider setting. The land that Lot covets is almost a return to Eden, thus the writer knows about Eden, but there is the ominous shadow of temptation because of the two evil cities. It is beautiful, but there is sin in the land. And Lot does not realise it, for he is not specifically under the protection of Yahweh or thoughtful about His covenants. He thinks only in terms of increasing wealth.

13.11 'So Lot chose for himself all the Circle of Jordan, and Lot journeyed east, and they separated themselves the one from the other.'

So Lot makes his choice. He will dwell among the cities of the plain. He is prepared to leave the place that first welcomed them, to which God had led them, for what he sees as better pastures. He does not realise what his choice is going to mean. How important it is that we make our choices aright and with much prayer and thought about what matters most.

13.12-13 'Abram dwelt in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelt in the cities of 'the Circle' and moved his tent as far as Sodom. Now the men of Sodom were wicked and great sinners against Yahweh.'

There is no doubt that the writer sees the significance of their choices. The one remaining in the place allotted by God, the other unconsciously approaching grave danger because his eyes feast on what seems so wonderful. He forgets the promises of God. He approaches Sodom. What more needs to be said? For Sodom is a centre of wickedness and sexual depravity (see Ezekiel 16.48-50 - where 'pride' and 'fullness of bread with prosperous ease' are said to be at the root of her sins). Note that although they are not worshippers of Yahweh their sin is said to be against Him. He is judge over all and has the right to obedience from all.

This description of Sodom is partially preparing us for what is to happen to Sodom in chapter 14. He is already preparing us for this, and giving us an explanation as to why Lot is involved in such a catastrophe. Those who consort with sinners must not complain when they share the consequences of their judgment. Connection with cities was regularly seen as a downward step.

But note also the continuing theme of Genesis 4, 10 and 11. Abram dwelt in 'the land', Lot dwelt in 'the cities'. It is a recurring theme that as men become involved with 'civilisation', with its prosperity and opportunities for sin, they become involved with its ways and forget God.

'Moved his tent.' This is in contrast with 'pitched his tent' (12.8). Bethel (the house of God) had been their centre, but now Lot moves his centre to Sodom. How many have done a similar thing and suffered thereby. Indeed, as we learn later, he takes up abode in Sodom and becomes an important man among them (19.2-3). (This incidentally draws attention to the fact that the way of life of the family of Terah does not exclude dwelling in a city. Thus it may well be that Abram once dwelt with his family in a house in Ur rather than just camping outside. For Terah was involved in the religion of Ur).

13.14-16 'And Yahweh said to Abram after Lot had separated from him, "Lift up your eyes now and look from the place where you are northward and southward, and eastward and westward. For all the land which you see, to you I will give it and to your seed for ever. And I will make your seed as the dust of the earth, so that if a man can count the dust of the earth then shall your seed also be countable.'

Note the deliberate contrast with verse 10. Lot lifted up his eyes with his main concern being how to extend his wealth and ensure his future, and beheld the Circle of Jordan, the way that

finally led to sin. Abram must now lift up his eyes, but it is at the command of God, and he will see prosperity and blessing and a glorious future, for he has walked before God. The land that surrounds him will one day belong to his descendants who will be numberless, and it will be theirs 'for ever' that is, into the distant future. By leaving his future in the hands of God Abram has triumphed, and his future is secure.

Once again we are aware that God has appeared to Abram in awesome holiness, and renewed with him the covenant of grace between them. And this is the reason why this whole history is preserved in writing, because it was the background to these promises. Why did this man and his family tribe carry with them these heavy tablets? Because they were the evidence and assurance of God's promises about what mattered to them most.

To be abundantly fruitful was the longing of every man in those times. Men lived on in their sons. Yet Abram's wife was barren, a grief of heart to them both. And the land on which he sojourns belongs to others. So God promises that his seed will one day be beyond counting, and that the land will one day be his.

It is noteworthy throughout that Abram is faced with these two continual questions in his mind. (1). Why is my wife barren so that I have no children? And (2). What does the future hold for me in this land? Yahweh reveals His goodness and concern by continually reassuring him about them both.

That both these promises were fulfilled in part we know from the Bible. But who today can count the seed of Abram? And as for his seed, both Jew and Arab, they now possess the land that was given to him. They may at present misuse it, but who can now doubt that God has been faithful to Abram?

13.17-18 'Arise, walk through the land, the length of it and the breadth of it, for I will give it to you.'

Wherever Abram walks he can look around and say, 'one day this will all belong to my children's children, for Yahweh has given it to me'. And walk around he must for it is the necessity of his manner of living. So every step he takes reminds him of the unmerited goodness of God. Lot walked around thinking of money. Abram walked around thinking of God. That is the test of the true child of God.

13.18 'And Abram moved his tent and came and dwelt by the oaks of Mamre which are in Hebron, and built there an altar to Yahweh.'

Abram now transfers the centre of his activities from Bethel to Hebron, in the hill country of the South. There he establishes his main camp and builds an altar for the worship of God. Trees denote water, and Abram has chosen well. It is a reasonably safe part of the country and will enable his family tribe to expand and grow.

The summons of verse 17 followed by the action in verse 18 is a semi-legal act of taking possession in the name of Yahweh so that the occupation is recognised legally by those round about, in accordance with the customs at that time. The fact of the occupation of Mamre around this time has been established by excavations in the area which revealed the remains of a Bronze age settlement. (While this cannot be specifically attached to Abram it demonstrates, as does so much else, that the narrative is in accord with the times).

'Which are in Hebron'. This is probably an added geographical note. The town of Hebron itself came into being around 1720 BC (see Numbers 13.22).

This is the end of this covenant record. There is no colophon but there seems little doubt it once formed a record of its own.

Abram, Lot, the kings of the North, the covenant with Melchizedek and others, Yahweh's renewed covenant with Abram (14.1-15.21).

The initial record we now read (chapter 14) is one of the most distinctive in Genesis. It deals not with a covenant with Yahweh, but with a historic episode where the wider world infringes on Abram's world and where he makes a firm covenant with neighbouring kings as a result of what ensues. It is this covenant which ensured that these details were put in writing.

The lives of Abram and his family tribe were rarely troubled from outside. Their comparative strength meant that while they left others untroubled they were untroubled themselves. The main routes taken by more powerful peoples led through the coastal plain to their West or along the King's Highway to their East. The central highlands were left largely alone.

But it was different for Lot. The place he had chosen was indeed fruitful but it was close to the King's Highway coming down from the North and extending southwards, a regular trade route. It was always possible that one day trouble would be seen on the horizon on that road. And so it proved.

The King's Highway was the name given to the direct road running from Damascus in Syria to the Gulf of Aqabah, then downwards East of the Dead Sea and the Jordan Valley. It was in use between the 23rd and 20th centuries BC, and was marked along its length by early Bronze age settlements and fortifications. It was a crucially important trade route.

This period at the beginning of the second millennium BC was a time when Mesopotamia was not one great powerful empire. Roving bands led by lesser kings would continually make their forays in an attempt to seize wealth and slaves. And the King's highway was a convenient route. It was just such a band which would prove the downfall of Lot. But the fact that control was exercised afterwards for twelve years suggests that this is also an attempt to safeguard the trade route.

14.1-4 'And it happened in the days of Amraphel, King of Shinar, Arioch, King of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer, King of Elam and Tidal, King of Goiim, that they made war with Bera, King of Sodom, and with Birsha, King of Gomorrah, Shinab, King of Admah, and Sheber, King of Zeboim, and the King of Bela, the same is Zoar. All these joined together in the vale of Siddim, the same is the Salt Sea. Twelve years they served Chedorlaomer, and in the thirteenth year they rebelled.'

This description sets the scene. It is a typical opening to early documents and records. It is the beginning of the explanation as to why the covenant is necessary. The kings from the North have come down and subjugated the cities near what is now the Dead Sea in order to protect the trade route, and exacted tribute from them. And now the cities are sick of the tribute and 'rebel', that is withhold their tribute.

This is not a battle between two equals, but a larger force overwhelming a group of small cities on the way to further conquests. The writer is only concerned with the local situation.

There is no question but that the names fit well into the period. While not identifiable the Northern kings bear genuine names typical of their background. The name Arioch is

paralleled by Ariwuku of Mari, and the Hurrian names Ariaku and Ari-ukku. Ellasar would fit a number of places in Mesopotamia. Chedorlaomer, meaning 'slave of Lagamer', an Elamite deity, is genuine Elamite, and the name of Tidal can be paralleled with the Hittite Tudhalia. The name of Amraphel is uncertain but should probably not be identified with Hammurabi as it once was.

The alliance of kings in this way is a feature of that particular period in history. It would be much less probable later. Thus this whole episode confirms a date for Abram at the very beginning of the second millennium BC.

It is not said that the four Northern kings are all directly involved personally in the attack, although it is always a possibility. These were not high kings aiming to build an empire, but rather comparatively smaller kings on a venture aiming to increase their wealth and safeguard the trade route. The fact that the tribute was paid to Chedorlaomer suggests that he led the raid, but was supported by troops from the other four kings who would receive some of the booty and tribute. This would explain why an Elamite king held such prominence in the raid. The number four is regularly symbolic of the world as a whole and of world affairs.

Elam was not yet as powerful as it would be but it was certainly a growing power. The other kings may have been leading invading bands elsewhere. They may, however, as petty kings, have been involved here. It may be that Chederlaomer provided the majority of the troops and that the others came along for the 'sport'. Chederlaomer is named third, possibly because of the importance of the other two before him. (The order is also alphabetical - but verse 9 demonstrates that this is probably not the reason for the sequence). However, it is he who receives the tribute. This would suggest that those kings were not actually directly involved as main combatants. Thirteen years later he would be named first. His reputation had clearly grown.

The names of the Southern kings are not identifiable, but the fact that no name is given to the King of Bela, a very minor king, brings out the accuracy of the narrative. At the time no one could remember who he was. An inventor would soon have found him a name.

'They rebelled', that is, they refused their tribute. Possibly they hoped they were not important enough to bother about. While they benefited from the trade route they probably did not appreciate its importance to outsiders. Unwittingly Lot was involved in this because he lived in Sodom but he could not complain for clearly he was aware of the situation.

'The same is the Salt Sea'. This identifying remark, probably added later, might be seen as confirmation that the valley, (and the cities in the Plain?) was known to have been engulfed by the southern end of the Dead Sea.

14.5-6 'And in the fourteenth year came Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him and smote the Rephaim in Ashteroth-karnaim, and the Zuzim in Ham, and the Emim in Shaveh-kiriathaim, and the Horites in their Mount Seir, unto El-paran which is by the wilderness. And they returned and came to Enmishpat (the same is Kadesh) and smote all the country of the Amalekites, and also the Amorites that dwelt in Hazazon-tamar.'

This is more than a punitive expedition. The intention is to go wider afield and the attack is powerful and far reaching. Chederlaomer has been increasing in power and is now clearly the leader. 'The kings who were with him' are the same kings mentioned previously, a demonstration of the strength of the force.

They sweep down the King's Highway, ignoring the rebels. This demonstrates their contempt for the five cities. They did not feel any need to protect their rear. Then they attack places on

the route down as far as extreme South of East Jordan, then they move round beyond the end of the Dead Sea and attack Kadesh, before finally coming back to smite the Amalekites, and the Amorites in Hazazon-tamar, prior to approaching the five kings who have refused tribute.

The Rephaim are mentioned in Genesis 15.20; Deuteronomy 2.11, 20; 3.11, 13, and the Emim in Deuteronomy 2.10, although there they are seen as in some way connected, Emim being seen as Rephaim. The Rephaim are clearly a more widespread people given differing local names. They had a reputation for great size. In Ammon they were known as the Zamzummim (Deuteronomy 2.20-21), who may be represented here as the Zumim. The Horites in Mount Seir are also mentioned in connection with them (Deuteronomy 2.12). Thus we have independent evidence of the close connection of these groups.

Horites were possibly connected with the Hurrians in the Upper Tigris, elements of whom had filtered down into Canaan and the name had become applied more widely (see Genesis 36.20 on; Deuteronomy 2.12, 22). Here a specific group of Horites is identified. These different peoples would have presented a fairly formidable foe to the four kings.

The Amalekites are well known elsewhere as dwelling in the South. The attacking of trade caravans was for them a way of life. The name Amorite indicated a mountain people and they were spread throughout the country on both sides of Jordan. The name Amorite could be applied to the inhabitants of Canaan generally, including the inhabitants of Transjordan. In this sense it had a wider meaning than Canaanite. These particular ones are identified as to their connection. The names are therefore all genuine and not misplaced.

The purpose of this attack was clearly to secure the trade routes and gain booty, but it is quite possible that some or all of these places had also refused tribute. The five kings are only dealt with as seemingly central to the situation because the writer is concerned with this aspect of the matter. The detail is put in the covenant agreement between Abram and Melchizedek to explain the final agreement.

The opinion the kings have of the five kings of the Jordan valley comes out in that they attack them on the way home when their troops are exulting in victory but are probably somewhat weary and longing to get home. They had had a number of fierce battles against worthy foes but they do not really anticipate any problem here. The number five (the covenant number) suggests that because the kings are connected with Abram's land they are to some extent 'people of the land', and therefore covenant people (it is Yahweh's land).

14.8-9 'And there went out the King of Sodom and the King of Gomorrah, and the King of Admah and the king of Zeboiim, and the King of Bela, (the same is Zoar), and they set the battle against them in the vale of Siddim, against Chederlaomer, King of Elam, and Tidal, King of Goiim, and Amraphel, King of Shinar, and Arioch, King of Ellasar, four kings against five.'

The five kings know that they are next on the list and pick their ground. They have no choice. But the four kings are too powerful and their cause is hopeless.

14.10 'Now the vale of Siddim was full of bitumen-pits, and the Kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, and they fell there, and those who remained fled to the mountain.'

They had probably hoped that the particular site, with its related problems with which they were familiar, would offer them an advantage but they had no chance against a superior force and the two main kings were killed while the remainder fled to safety in the mountains.

We have already been told that Sodom was a wicked city (13.13) so it may well be that in the

context of the narrative as a whole this is seen as God's preliminary judgment on Sodom.

14.11-12 'And they took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their victuals, and went their way. And they took Lot, Abram's brother's son, who dwelt in Sodom, and his goods, and departed.'

The mention of victuals is interesting for it suggests that they were having some difficulties with regard to food, but here they were able to restock to some extent, and tired but triumphant make for home. Their task was complete, their success was clear. And they knew that they had little to fear. They were complacent. But they made one error. They captured a servant of Yahweh. The half repetition of verse 11 in verse 12 is typical of the Ancient Near Eastern love for repetition in their literature.

We note that it is only this battle that is mentioned in any detail for it is close to home for the writer. This is because the covenant is about them. However, the description of Lot is interesting. A description by an outsider who knew Abram well, 'his father's brother's son'. Not the description that would come from a member of the family tribes.

14.13 'And there came one who had escaped and told Abram the Hebrew. Now he dwelt by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite, the brother of Eshcol and brother of Aner, and these were confederate with Abram'.

Had it not been for this situation we might not have known of these wider relationships of Abram. Mamre the Amorite has clearly been named after the famous oaks in the area in which he lives which is only a problem to the very sceptical, it is in fact quite reasonable and feasible. Many people in ancient inscriptions are named after places. He has two brothers, Eshcol and Aner. They are all presumably petty princes like Abram. Here we learn that the four of them are in a loose alliance ready to come to each other's aid in time of need.

Abram is called '[the Hebrew](#)' only here, a term which represents him as a stateless person and as a (potential) leader of a military force who is part of a confederation. As Abram was stateless in contrast with Mamre *the Amorite* this method of identifying him may be seen as of some significance. It ties in with the use of the terms 'apiru and habiru elsewhere of stateless military leaders. The writer is describing Abram as he sees him.

14.14 'And when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive he led out his trained men, born in his house, three hundred and eighteen, and pursued as far as Dan. And he divided himself against them by night, he and his servants, and smote them, and pursued them to Hobah which is to the left of Damascus.'

The writer is clearly greatly impressed with Abram. He ignores the assistance of his confederates (but see 14.24) and concentrates on Abram's part in the affair, partly because he is somewhat in awe of him as a 'Habiru', and partly because he is central to the following covenant..

The word for trained men is hanakim, a rare word found also in the Egyptian execration texts (cursing rituals) calling down curses on the Hittite chieftains "and their hanakim". Later the word became obsolete but it is correctly used in this setting.

Similarly, the idea of Abraham having 318 trained servants makes good sense. Details of an inspection of private armies are recorded on a tablet dating to the third dynasty at Ur (Abraham's time). They range between 100 and 600 troops, one being made up of 301 men. Abraham's 318 trained troops fits the background. With his Ur background and the constant possible dangers to a small but wealthy family tribe such a force would be seen by him as

necessary, and he has clearly trained them well.

Objections to Abram's being able to act in this way treat him as simply another shepherd but that is to ignore his unusual background. Some men are born to be leaders and fighters when needed and Abram was one of them. Together with his confederates he may well have had a thousand men under him, some of whom have been highly trained. And, as we shall see later, he possibly had more.

Abram is as aware as the critics that, in spite of his strength, he has little chance against the kings in a straight fight. They would have two or three times the number. But he knows that they are weary after a hard expedition, laden with booty, and not expecting pursuit and that he can catch them unawares, and he makes his plans accordingly. Indeed the forces of the kings may not have been keeping close together in formation. There is nothing like an easy victory to make an enemy complacent. And he may well have caught stragglers and forced them to divulge where Lot could be found, so that he knew exactly where to attack.

He reconnoitres the section of the unsuspecting army he intends to attack, and divides his trained men into effective groups, supported by the men of his confederates and possibly others. He then waits for nightfall.

The enemy are taken totally by surprise. They wake in the darkness to find themselves under attack by a grim and determined force of shadowy figures, trained men, coming in at them from different angles. They do not know the size of the force, but the enemy seem everywhere. The make up of the force is uncertain. These are not the soft dwellers of the cities, and night time and imagination does the rest. They panic.

They had been so confident of their security from attack, and so satisfied with themselves as they rested their weary bodies, that the attack, which was not only unexpected but from a completely unknown source, throws them into disarray. All kinds of possibilities grip their minds. They are soon in full flight and the panic spreads to their fellow soldiers.

It is certainly not the only time in history that such a thing has happened. And once the flight has begun their discipline is in tatters. Followed through the night by the grim, relentless demons who pursue them they flee for safety, an easy prey to the terrible slaughter by their pursuers of those who were tardy, not slowing down until they reach Damascus and the pursuit drops off. They still are not sure who has been pursuing them, and their later tales would no doubt make good reading. And so occurs Abram's victory, a scenario so daring that it takes away the breath, but is by no means impossible.

The mention of Dan may refer to a different one from the well known Dan in the Old Testament. Alternatively it may be a scribal updating of Laish, (whose name was later changed to Dan), so as to identify the site to readers.

14.16 'And he brought back all the goods, and also brought again his brother Lot and his goods, and the women also, and the people. And the king of Sodom went out to meet him after his return from the slaughter of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, at the Vale of Shaveh (the same is the King's Vale).'

The fleeing army in their panic have left behind much of the booty they had collected and Abram returns with it in triumph. (The description does not necessarily mean that the kings are dead. The kings' names stand for their people). But far more important to him is that he has rescued his nephew Lot. This is why he had been so determined. Family loyalty was a powerful impetus. Nothing else would have made him take the risk he did.

The description shows that what he brought back is carefully weighed up, 'all the goods, the women also, and the people', for there is to be a reckoning. Messengers have no doubt gone on ahead and the new King of Sodom comes out to welcome the returning heroes, and to negotiate as to what he can salvage from the affair. He recognises that a Habiru leader may well not be sympathetic.

14.18 'And Melchizedek, King of Salem, brought out bread and wine, and he was a priest of El Elyon (God Most High). And he said, "Blessed be Abram of El Elyon, possessor of heaven and earth, and blessed be El Elyon who has delivered your enemies into your hand". And he gave him a tenth of all.'

The sudden appearance of Melchizedek of Salem takes us by surprise. If Salem is Jerusalem, although that is not certain, it is not on the expected return route from Damascus to Sodom, and Melchizedek has not previously been obviously involved. There must therefore be something significant behind it. Clearly Melchizedek is involved somehow and sufficiently to take the trouble to bring victuals to the returning troops. These would be needed as Sodom and Gomorrah had had their victuals taken by the four kings (deliberately stated - verse 11) and the ready food stolen would have already been eaten by the hungry troops returning to their homelands. The obvious answer to the problem is a treaty situation.

We have now come to the nub of the narrative. Here in writing is the confirmation of the covenant between Abram and Melchizedek and the King of Sodom on the sharing of the booty, put into writing by Melchizedek's recorder, of which a copy is given to Abram (or copied by his steward). We do not know fully all that lay behind it but it is quite clear that Abram is now called on to pay a reckoning to King Melchizedek of Salem, and that he knew what it was about and was expecting it.

The 'witness' to the agreement is El Elyon (God Most High), the god worshipped by Melchizedek, and accepted by Abram who sees Him as Yahweh the Creator (14.22). The credit for the victory is given to Him by Melchizedek. Abram can agree because he thinks of Him in terms of Yahweh. El Elyon is possibly also accepted by the King of Sodom. The payment as far as Melchizedek is concerned is one tenth of the booty.

We can compare Melchizedek's words with 9.26 where 'blessed be the Yahweh, the God of Shem' referred to a blessing on Shem. Here the two main parties are mentioned. 'Blessed be Abram' and 'blessed be El Elyon (the god of Melchizedek)', meaning 'blessed be Melchizedek'. These are the two main parties to the covenant.

There is external evidence of a cult of El Elyon and some support for connecting the worship of El Elyon with Canaanite Jerusalem. He is involved here because Melchizedek is a major player and is superior in status. (Melchizedek is also a good Canaanite name - compare Adonizedek in Josha 10.1). The fact that this incident is allowed to stand as it is indicates the essential accuracy of the narrative and its ancient provenance.

But why should Abram hand over one tenth of all the booty? The answer, partly at least, lies in the provision of food. The returning heroes and the captors they have delivered are supplied with sustenance by the king of Salem as he comes to meet them on their return. This is confirmed in verse 24 where payment for the food is specifically mentioned. But this in itself indicates some kind of treaty arrangement between Abram and Melchizedek. Why else would he come with provisions?

This brings us to two other possible factors that we may need to take into account.

The first is that in some way Melchizedek of Salem is recognised as having treaty rights and

responsibilities with respect to Abram and his confederates. This may include the fact that they used his fields for grazing when the harvest has been gathered in, and they may have enjoyed other benefits that they would know of, including rights over the area around the oaks of Mamre, which could also be part of a treaty which included the sharing of booty. There may also have been an agreement for the provision of military help when needed, probably reciprocally. Salem (compare Psalm 76.2), which would in future centuries become Jerusalem, may well have had great influence and exerted rights over the surrounding area.

Then secondly it could be that Melchizedek had provided mercenaries to assist Abram in the attack in return for a portion of the booty. They are not mentioned, but this might be because his scribe is writing the account and with true Oriental courtesy he is happy to give all the credit to Abram and his men (which would also explain why Abram's confederates have also been ignored in the account, for the agreement is with Abram) while taking payment for his own part in the project.

While Abram had been gathering his own men he could well also have sent messengers to Melchizedek with whom he had a treaty arrangement, calling on him to send him extra troops per the previously agreed terms, agreed for whenever he would need help against attack, and probably vice versa. Now he has to pay the reckoning.

But there is also the question of the remainder of the booty. About this agreement has to be reached, and this includes the King of Sodom. This is also incorporated into the covenant as we see in verses 21-24. Then, once agreed, the contract will be 'signed, sealed and delivered'.

Full credit must be given to Abram, who generously declines his portion. The tenth part is given to Melchizedek. Abram's confederates are to receive their 'portion', clearly a recognised amount. And it is agreed that the remainder will be handed back to the representative of the five kings.

(We can compare with this Abraham's contract for the field and cave at Machpelah in chapter 23. There the impression given is of the gift of the land and an equally generous Abram insisting on payment. In fact we have the terms of a strict contract, again agreed in true Oriental fashion. The same may be true here).

But could all the facts in the contract have been put together so quickly to enable it to be put in writing as here? The answer is that they were already known. The tributary status of the five kings, and by whom, was a matter of history, the details of the attacks on the various peoples would quickly spread by word of mouth through the land, and could be confirmed from released prisoners. They had seen the army march down the King's Highway. It was in the interests of all the people to watch and know where the kings might strike next. The final details would come from the mercenaries themselves.

And now we come to the second part of the covenant agreement.

14.21 'And the King of Sodom said to Abram, "Give me the people and take the goods for yourself".' This was not generosity, this is the opening gambit in his negotiations to rescue what he can from the situation. Abram owes him nothing. Thus he asks hopefully for the most he can expect. Can he have his people back? And he knows that Abram could even get difficult about that if he were not concerned about future relationships.

14.22-24 'And Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have lifted up my hands to Yahweh, God Most High, Possessor of Heaven and earth that I will not take a thread nor a shoe latchet nor anything that is yours, lest you say 'I have made Abram rich', except only that which the young men have eaten, and the portion for the men who went with me, Aner, Eshcol and

Mamre. Let them take their portion”.’

Abram's reply is that he will not demand the major portion which is his due. Once his confederates have received their agreed share, and the food provided has been paid for, the rest will be handed back to the five cities apart from what is given to other released captives who may well have been allowed to return home.

What he has done he has done for Lot, not for gain, and he is rich enough. He is not a paid mercenary leader, he is a servant of Yahweh. And he also probably does not want the King of Sodom to think that he has any future claims on him ('I have made Abram rich' could be used in a number of ways, for example to suggest that future tribute may be owed).

So behind the account is a covenant in accord with local politics and customs, and the sharing out of the spoils in accordance with them. This is the firm record of what has been agreed. Abram comes well out of the whole matter in many respects. We can now understand even more why he is treated with such great respect by the people of the land who would never forget his exploit. And he has shown generosity of spirit and a sensible wariness of being seen as indebted to anyone. To accept the king's offer in a solemn covenant might have been seen as putting him under treaty obligation

The whole account is of course incorporated into the wider narrative of Genesis in order to bring glory to Yahweh, the God of Abram, Who clearly has been behind his success. But the lack of mention of this within the narrative, we note that at no stage was there a word from Yahweh, is explained by its local covenant significance and the identity of the scribe who was probably in the service of Melchizedek.

(Note. The fact is that Melchizedek was priest-king of Salem and thus a priest and worshipper of 'the Most High God' Whom Abram recognised as Yahweh. As such he clearly had some overlordship over Abram, even if only temporarily as a kind of landlord. This is later taken to demonstrate a superior High Priesthood to that of Aaron. Abram was primary to Aaron, therefore any priest he acknowledged must be superior to Aaron. Thus in Psalm 110.4 the idea of a Davidic priesthood is based on this, and upon the fact that Jerusalem was David's city (by right of capture) and not a part of Judah or Israel, so that David was its king-priest. This is also later taken up in Hebrews 7. End of note).

15.1 'After these things the word of Yahweh came to Abram in a vision saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram, for I am your shield and your exceeding great reward.'

The phrase 'after these things' is used elsewhere as a connecting phrase between narratives but always following 'and it happened'. Thus its use here without 'and it happened' is distinctive, signifying a specifically closer connection with what goes before. So the covenant about to be received is intended to be directly connected with what precedes it and is Yahweh's response to Abram's behaviour there, especially his refusal to take riches for himself. In the combined collection the two chapters are to be seen as one whole with the Melchizedek covenant narrative used as background and explanation to the new covenant.

'The word of Yahweh'. A unique phrase in Genesis for a unique situation. It arises here as a contrast to his covenants with kings. The word of Yahweh is more important than covenants with kings. Here is a word that is permanent, that is everlasting, that is above kings.

It is also a prophetic word that is coming. The prophets constantly received 'the word of Yahweh'. Here such a word is given to Abram. He is now a prophet (see 20.7). No wonder he is filled with awe. This is confirmed by the words 'in a vision' (compare Numbers 12.6). What he is to see is not natural, it can only be seen in vision, for no man can see God and live. He has

repudiated earthly riches, now he is to have spiritual riches. We must not underestimate what this meant for Abram and also for his followers. He is their priest, now he is to be a prophet.

'Do not be afraid'. Although it is not yet mentioned this already suggests the beginning of an experience which fills Abram with awe. But he need not fear. Yahweh is his shield and protector so that he need fear nothing (for shield see Psalm 3.3; 28.7; 33.20). He is also overflowing abundantly his treasury above all treasures and the guarantee of his future prosperity and fruitfulness. He has refused wealth so that none might say they had made Abram rich. Yahweh will therefore Himself assure him of riches of a far greater kind.

15.2 **'And Abram said, "Oh Lord Yahweh, what will you give seeing that I go childless and he who will be possessor of my house is Dammesek Eliezer?" And he said, "see, you have given no seed to me, and see, one born in my house is my heir".'**

How the yearning of Abram's heart comes out in these verses. Yes, Yahweh will reward him in many ways, will even make him a prophet, but what is that to this lack which cannot be satisfied? He has no heir born of his flesh. Let Yahweh look. He has promised him abundant seed, but that seed will not be that of him and his beloved wife. We cannot avoid the suggestion that he feels that God has disappointed him. God has only to look and He will see the cause of his unhappiness. But there is also a hint of hope. Surely Yahweh can do something about it?

'He who will be possessor of my house'. The appointment of a steward as heir, to be replaced if a son is born, is well attested elsewhere. In return he would ensure a suitable burial for his master. Similar situations are found, for example, in documents at 15th century BC Nuzi and in Ur around 1800 BC. An Old Babylonian letter from Larsa states that a childless man can adopt his own slave.

'Dammesek Eliezer'. Names are nowhere else given to Abram's followers in these narratives, and the mention here stresses that this man is the heir. As such he could not be anonymous and so must be named. We do not know the significance of Dammesek but **'the Damascene'** was understood later. This is not certain (Eliezer was **'born in my house'**) and further discoveries may throw light on the matter.

'See ----- see ----'. The force of Abram's feelings come over in the repetition. Ancient literature is constantly repetitive, sometimes almost monotonously so. It was written to be repeated aloud and the hearers loved to move along with familiar ideas. So the repetitions in verses 2 and 3 are typical. Indeed the repeated **'see'** (**'behold'**) refers back to the previous statement, putting emphasis on the thought.

This interruption in the vision is quite remarkable. Yahweh has come to confirm His promises in an increasingly emphatic way, but Abram, in the midst of his awe and fear, breaks in and reveals the deepest yearnings of his heart. Although he loves Yahweh and believes Him and His promises, he is also human, and years of hurt, both on Sarai's part and on his own, now come through at this crowning point in his life. A prophet, yes, the founder of a nation, yes, but if he is a prophet let him know, - why, oh why, must it be through the seed of another?

But Yahweh is aware of the longings of his heart. He is aware of what lies in the depths of his soul, and He takes time off from His greater revelation to comfort His servant. What comfort these verses should give to us. The faithful and redoubtable Abram has his weaknesses after all, and his God bends to him in that weakness.

15.4 **'And see, the word of Yahweh came to him saying, "This man will not be your heir. He who will be truly of your own blood (will come forth out of your own bowels) will be your heir".'**

We note that the writer himself responds to Abram. He responds to Abram's 'see' ('behold'), twice repeated, with a third 'see' ('behold'). Three is the number of completeness and he wants us to know that what Abram was calling God to look at is completely answered.

'The word of Yahweh came to him'. He has become a prophet and his first prophecy will be concerning his own deepest desires. 'This man will not be your heir, one who is of your own body and blood will be your heir.' This is what he had craved, and this Yahweh gives him. A child of his own.

And yet it had not been a totally selfish craving, it had been a craving that God would fulfil in him what He had commanded in all, 'Be fruitful and multiply' (Genesis 1.28; 9.1, 7). He had not only felt sick at heart, he had felt that he had failed God. But now Yahweh Himself assures him that this will not be so. He is to have a son and heir.

15.5 'And he brought him outside and said, "Look now towards heaven and name the stars by number if you are able to number them." And he said to him, "So will your seed be".'

The repetition of 'He said to him' is to emphasise the certainty of the promise. Abram may grieve no longer, for of his own blood will be born countless multitudes, countless as the stars above as seen in a clear Near Eastern sky with no artificial light of man to hide them.

15.6 'And he believed in Yahweh, and he counted it to him for righteousness.'

What a remarkable verse is this, for it is the heart of the Gospel. As Abram looks at the multiplicity of stars he believes, not in the stars, but in the faithfulness and goodness of Yahweh. All his disappointment and bitterness melts away for Yahweh has promised and He is faithful. And Yahweh sees his believing heart and accounts it to him as righteousness, as the fulfilment of all that was required of him in the covenant of God.

To the men of those days, in tribes and nations of which they were an essential part, the idea of righteousness was very much founded in loyalty to the tribe or nation. The truly righteous was he who truly served his tribe. This did, of course, include a certain morality, for obeying the laws of the tribe was part of his service, but it meant more than that, it meant total dedication to the tribe.

But here that thought is transferred to a man's response to his God. Abram had left his tribe because of his loyalty to his God. Now in a supreme act of faith he responds to God's promise, the God who in his own heart had replaced his tribe. And God accounts him as a worthy man, both as one who has walked in obedience to all His requirements and as one whose total loyalty is to Him.

But the vital point is that this is not because of his obedience, nor because of his loyalty, although both had in fact been amply proved, but because of his response of faith, because he accepted the impossible of which God spoke to him. For his obedience could never be total, and his loyalty could never be total (we have seen how he has sometimes failed in both) but God accounts him as, and accepts him as, totally faithful and obedient because of his faith in God's promise. No wonder Paul uses this verse as the rock on which his doctrine of justification by faith is founded (Galatians 3.6).

The pointing to the stars by Yahweh is subtle. To other nations the stars were gods, but to Abram they are to be the permanent reminder of the promises of Yahweh. Wherever he goes he will see them and remember.

Now in verse 7 God returns to the point he had begun at in verse 1. This is the main revelation,

the 'word of Yahweh', although in His goodness God has given Abram a second subsidiary word of Yahweh to confirm the birth of a natural son. In a sense there has been a diversion over the great concern of Abram's heart, but how blessedly it has been responded to, and what great blessing it means for Abram both with regard to the desire of his heart and in his spiritual life, but now Yahweh must return to His primary purpose. This is no break in the narrative. It is demanded in verse 1. Now will His covenant with Abram be ratified as never before. (Verses 2-6 were in one sense a break in the narrative, to satisfy the deep yearning in the heart of Abram).

15.7 'And he said to him, "I am Yahweh who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldees to give you this land to inherit it." '

This solemn declaration commences the giving of what follows. We can compare it with Exodus 20.2, "I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage". It is a declaration of Yahweh's total sovereignty and goodness in readiness for a solemn declaration. Here is specific confirmation that it was in Ur of the Chaldees that God began the calling of Abram.

'To give you this land to inherit it.' Abram has spurned riches at the hands of the king of Sodom, now Yahweh promises not only riches but total possession of the land. In the final analysis land meant everything. While a semi-nomad Abram had many blessings but he was to some extent dependent on others like Melchizedek for the use of land, now Yahweh promises that the land will one day be his, all of it. For purposes which only Yahweh knows the end of.

15.8 'And he said, "O Lord Yahweh, By what means will I know that I will inherit it?" '

Moved by Yahweh's goodness and compassion to him Abram asks a vital question. 'And he said, "Oh Lord Yahweh, how shall I know that I will inherit it?" This is not a question arising from doubt, but arising from the faith that is welling from his heart as a result of his response of faith to Yahweh's previous promise. Inspired as a new prophet he is now bold to ask, for he must convince his people. He wants to know what he can give them as a guarantee.

15.9 'And he said to him, "Take on my behalf a three year old heiffer, and a three year old she goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove and a young pigeon".'

As a prophet Abram is commanded to act on God's behalf. As he acts it is Yahweh Who, as it were, takes the animals and birds.

'Three years old', three, the number of completeness, indicates one which is complete and full. It is the equivalent of 'without spot and blemish'. What follows takes some considerable period of time, lasting until sundown. Abram has asked, and now he must act deliberately on Yahweh's behalf, not knowing fully what He does.

15.10 'And he took on his behalf all these and divided them in the middle and laid one half on one side and the other on the other. But he did not divide the birds.'

Abram does what God tells him. He takes the defined animals and slays them and cuts them in half and lays the halves on the ground to provide a way between them.

15.11 'And the birds of prey descended on the carcasses, but he drove them away.'

This totally unnecessary description of a seemingly irrelevant incidence is an evidence of the fact that this account came from an eyewitness. Yet it has in it the seed of truth. For the birds of prey are a reminder of those who will seek to prevent his descendants' possession of the

land, who as it were are even now trying to prevent the establishing of the covenant, and a reminder that they too can be driven away. It also draws attention to the awfulness of the fates of the victims, not only dead but, were it not for the intervention of the prophet, to be torn up and eaten.

Are we also to see in this incident the sinister figure that lay behind the snake in the Garden of Eden seeking to intervene? He too desires to prevent the establishing of the covenant, for he senses its importance.

But we may ask, what is the purpose of all this? The answer is that it is following ancient custom in the swearing of a solemn oath and the establishing of a solemn covenant (see Jeremiah 34.18-19). The divided animals are saying, 'let me die if I break this covenant' (Jeremiah 34.20).

But we know that the animals are but a symbol, a type, for the blood that must be shed, for the fulfilment of God's covenant is to be His own blood, shed for the sins of the world.

15.12 'And when the sun was going down a deep sleep fell on Abram, and lo, a horror of great darkness fell on him.'

Words fail to describe the sacredness of that moment, and the awe and even godly terror that seizes hold of Abram. He falls into a deep sleep (compare Genesis 2.21; Job 4.13; 33.15-16), for wakeful he could not see God and live. And the horror of darkness is an awareness of inconceivable things that are occurring at this moment, which he can sense but cannot comprehend. An awareness of darkness, of unbelievable darkness, for before the light there must be darkness; it is as though this was a new creation (Genesis 1.2-3) and one hovers near who would destroy this symbolic act which speaks of something, although he knows not what, which will totally destroy him.

And Another will one day hang, with His blood shed, and he too will experience such intense and unbelievable darkness so that even the skies around Him will become dark in sympathy. But Abram knows nothing of this. Yet he is a prophet, and a prophet reveals better than he knows.

Now before the symbolic act, the words of the covenant must be spoken over the dead carcasses of the victims.

15.13-16 'And he said to Abram, "Know for a guaranteed certainty that your seed will be a stranger in a land that is not their's, and will serve them, and they will afflict them, for four hundred years. And that nation whom they serve I will also judge. And afterwards they will come out with great substance. But you will go to your fathers in peace. You will be buried in a good old age. And in the fourth generation they will come here again. For the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full".'

Yahweh reveals to Abraham something of the future. Firstly that the certainty of him having seed comes out in that God can speak of their future. Secondly that their future will not be straightforward. They will be aliens and slaves in a foreign land. He has control of their destiny. But it stresses that their land will not be theirs for a long time to come. Thirdly there is the implication that this will be followed by them receiving a land of their own. Fourthly it brings out Yahweh's power as the One Who can alone determine the future of that foreign land as their Judge. He is not a local tribal god. Fifthly Abraham has the guarantee that it will not happen in his lifetime. Sixthly it brings out that God is a God Who acts as Judge only in the light of true moral necessity. His judgments are not arbitrary, but on a moral basis, and He will not punish or condemn any until it is necessary, and will judge according to deserts. Again

there is the implication that all judgment is in His hands. He is over all. Other 'gods' were arbitrary and limited in what they could do and rarely took morality into account. They were simply sinful super-humans.

This recognition of God's power and goodness may be obvious to us. In the time of Abraham it was very special revelation.

The Amorites here represent the inhabitants of the whole of Canaan and Transjordan. The depth of their iniquity is spoken of in Leviticus 18.24-27 where the full nature of their sexual abominations, resulting from their debased religion, are discreetly described. But it has not yet reached its pinnacle and therefore a period of waiting is necessary. Yahweh allots to nations their times and seasons (Daniel 2.21). Thus again does the writer remind us of the universal sovereignty of Yahweh.

The interchanging of the terms 'Canaanites' and 'Amorites' to describe the people of the land (although they are not necessarily precisely synonymous) is testified to in Egyptian texts where the inhabitants of the land can be called 'Canaan' or 'the land of Amurru'.

This is a time of prophetic revelation. Yahweh has previously promised the land to Abram but now he is made aware of what will result before its fulfilment. Before that time Abram's seed must be a stranger in a land that is not theirs. Already even now they were strangers in 'a land that is not theirs', a land where there were many nations (a contrast with what is to be), but they will yet suffer under another single nation, who must therefore be a powerful nation, whom they will serve, and who will afflict them, and this condition will go on for four hundred years. But it is the service and not necessarily the affliction that will endure for this time.

Abram may well have thought of some great king coming in and subjugating the land, but the later reader aware of the final complete narrative will know what is meant

Yet when it happened there could be no complaint, for Israel could have returned from Egypt when things were going well, but they did not do so. They had this warning but they still did not do so. They preferred the land of delights and plenty to the land promised to them by God. Thus it was also through their own disobedience that they suffered. It is the result that is being prophesied, not what should be.

But the promises of Yahweh cannot be hindered by men's failure, or by great nations, and judgment will come on the nation which enslaves them and they will return to the land God promised them with great substance, just as Abram had himself come into the land with great substance, for God never does things by halves.

The number 400 is significant. Neither 3, 5 or 7 could be used for they would represent completeness, covenant connection and divine perfection. But four is certainly seen later as the number which signified the world and is the number of judgment. Four rivers flowing from Eden to encompass the known world outside the Garden (2.10), 40 days of rain on the earth producing the flood (7.12), 40 days still under judgment before release (8.6), 400 hundred years signifying the decline of man (11.12-17 - each with another significant number added on), four kings who were the first invaders of the land (14.9), four beasts who represent world empires (Daniel chapters 2 and 7). Only four intensified could be used here. Thus it means a long period connected with world empire and judgment.

'But you will go to your fathers in peace, you will be buried in a good old age'. Abram is promised that while he is alive this will not happen. Until he dies there will be peace. To 'go to one's fathers' was a stereotyped phrase meaning simply to die and be buried, for that is finally where one's ancestors were. 'In a good old age' (compare Job 5.26). This was considered a

special gift from God (compare Genesis 25.8). So Abram learns that the land will not be theirs in his day.

'In the fourth generation they will come here again'. Later a generation would be 40 years, but here it is a hundred years. Longevity was still remembered and enjoyed. Yet again the emphasis is on 'four'. Thus the number may be symbolic and not necessarily to be thought of as needing to be applied too literally. Once God's judgment is ready for 'the Amorites', the inhabitants of the land, then they will come back.

So finishes the prophetic 'word of Yahweh' to Abram (15.1). Now its fulfilment must be finally guaranteed.

15.17 'And it about that when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold a flaming furnace and a flaming torch that passed between these pieces.'

The covenant is finalised and sealed. As elsewhere the flaming furnace and the flaming torch represent Yahweh Himself, although not directly. The mention of two signifies a twofold divine witness. We can compare the two angels who will be witnesses to the judgment of Sodom (chapter 19) as Yahweh's representatives. Abram is not involved. This is a gift of God's grace.

The writer now summarises the covenant. The special nature of what has occurred is clear. Nowhere else is such a comment made on a theophany as 'know of a surety'. He recognises the solemnity and totally unbreakable nature of what has happened. This can only indicate the end of the original tablet recording the covenant, finalising the extent of the promised land.

15.18-21 'In that day Yahweh made a covenant with Abram "to your seed I have given this land, from the River of Egypt to the Great River, the River Euphrates"; the Kenite and the Kenizzite and the Kadmonite, and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Rephaim, and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Girgashite and the Jebusite.'

So the boundaries of the promised land are fixed in a general sense, to be achieved in the day of Solomon. 'The river of Egypt' may not be the Nile but the Brook of Egypt (1 Kings 8.65), the southernmost boundary of the land (it is in contrast with 'the great river', while the Nile is as great a river as the Euphrates), probably the Wadi el Arish just below Gaza, which reaches up towards the Gulfs of Suez and Aqaba, thus excluding the absolute desert. But etymologically it would appear to speak of the Nile for a 'brook' (nahal) is a torrent wadi arising after the rains, while a river (nehar) is a river of more permanence. There is no difficulty with seeing it as the southernmost part of the Nile in a general sense, not necessarily applied too literally. (We do not know how far south tributaries of the Nile came then). Either way the general boundary is clear. The land reaches from Egypt to the Euphrates, two natural boundaries. In inscriptions Sargon II reaches the 'brook of Egypt' and establishes a governor there to Pharaoh's alarm (see 2 Kings 24.7).

The writer then summarises the inhabitants of the land that is promised. There are ten in number, a number which signifies totality. (Compare the lists of ten patriarchs). This use in this way of a group of 'ten' may indicate the great age of the narrative. Later it would be reduced to seven.

The Birth of Ishmael and God's Covenant With Him (Genesis 16.1-14).

This chapter is a record of the covenant God makes with Ishmael and the historical background and theophany that seals it. Without the covenant, which would be put in writing on her return to Abram as evidence of Yahweh's covenant with Ishmael, these events would have disappeared into obscurity.

16.1-2 'Now Sarai, Abram's wife bore him no children, and she had a handmaid, an Egyptian whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, "Look, now, Yahweh has restrained me from bearing. Go in, I beg you, to my handmaid. It may be that I will obtain a child by her".'

Sarai knows of God's promises to Abram, the covenant promises. But she has reached the age when it is unlikely she will have a child. As time passes she grieves for the dilemma of her husband. She has an Egyptian handmaid, probably one of those given to Abram by Pharaoh, and she proposes that Abram has a child by her handmaid and that they adopt the child as Abram's heir.

She is aware what it has meant to Abram not to have an heir, and as they grow older together she is concerned to give him satisfaction. What she proposes was in accordance with custom, and it will remove her shame. It was an accepted practise that a wife's servant, being her slave and not her husband's, could bear a child for her through her husband, and because the slave was hers the child was hers also. If a natural son was born later many examples elsewhere allow for him to replace the adopted son.

Thus the tablets from ancient Nuzi give an interesting near-parallel to this practise - 'If Gilimninu (the bride) will not bear children, Gilimninu shall take a woman of N/Lulluland (where the best slaves came from) as a wife for Shennima.' The slave woman would improve in status but would remain of inferior status to the real wife. (Compare 30.3, 9 - there the slave woman bears 'on the knees' of her mistress. That is, her child will be her mistress's).

Nuzi dates later than Genesis (15th Century BC), but similar records have been recovered from other earlier sites such as Ur, Kish, Ebla, Alalakh, Mari and Boghazkoi. However although there there was the similar practise of a barren wife arranging for a slave to bear a child for her elsewhere, it was not necessarily always the case, for regularly the husband could take his own action, or simply adopt a slave. But the way used by Sarai preserved the wife's pride and possibly gave her greater rights.

A subsidiary wife and her child could in many cases not be sent away (compare Genesis 16:6 and 21:10,11), although there is an example where it is said that the freedom obtained by expulsion compensates for the action.

But while these practises do confirm the authenticity of the background to the narratives, they cannot be used for dating, as such customs continued unchanged for hundreds of years, and varied between groups.

16.2c-3 'And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. And Sarai, Abram's wife took Hagar the Egyptian, her handmaid, after Abram had dwelt in the land of Canaan for ten years, and gave her to Abram her husband to be his wife.'

Abram has shown great consideration for his wife by not acting on his own. Probably his confidence in Yahweh has caused him to delay action up to this point. He had probably hoped for a son by Sarai. Here it is stressed that the initiative now comes from Sarai, and at his wife's insistence he yields. He knows it is important for his wife to have a protector in the future, and wants her to be satisfied in her heart.

'Ten years'. A round number not to be taken literally. It means 'a good number of years' (compare 'ten times' - 31.41). Probably the idea is that they have been in the land of promise without a birth resulting and the 'ten years' indicates a sufficient and justifiable length of time to justify secondary action in order to produce an heir, descended from Abram, as God had promised.

The twofold stress on the fact that Hagar is an Egyptian is possibly intended to make us look back and remember the first time that Abram pre-empted God, in Egypt. There too his faith faltered.

16.4 'And he went in to Hagar and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived her mistress was of little account in her eyes.'

The plan was successful. But Hagar was an Egyptian and not brought up to tribal customs, and her success made her feel superior to her barren mistress. She sees herself as now the important wife and seizes the opportunity to take over that position. She begins to act in a superior way and to supplant her mistress as though her mistress were now of little importance. She does not accept her status as a producer of a child on Sarai's behalf.

16.5 'And Sarai said to Abram, "My wrong be on you. I gave my handmaid for you to make love to (into your bosom) and when she saw that she had conceived I was of little account in her eyes. Yahweh judge between you and me".'

'My wrong be on you.' This is an official plea for legal protection. Sarai now wants Abram as head of the family tribe to remedy the situation. She dare not act on her own. She has given her slave to her husband and her slave is now no longer just a handmaid. He is the one who has the authority, and all that is done in the tribe is in his hands. He must be the one to put right the wrong done to her.

'Yahweh judge between you and me.' She reminds him that he must consider what Yahweh's verdict would be. Her insistence is that she be firmly reinstated as his principal wife with the authority going with such a position, a position that Hagar is undermining.

16.6 'And Abram said to Sarai, "Look, your maid is in your hand. Do with her whatever is right in your eyes." And Sarai treated her harshly and she fled from her face.'

Abram passes his judgment. Sarai is given authority to act as she sees fit. The woman is still her maid (it may be that this is an intentional downgrading of Hagar who had become more than just a maid). Whatever she does will be seen as having his sanction. He accepts her, in accordance with custom, as still the principal wife. Hagar possibly did not understand that Sarah was unique as a child of Terah, thus being of the tribal aristocracy.

Sarai then makes clear her position to the tribe, who will have been watching the power struggle and waiting to see what Abram would do, by her harsh treatment of the slave who has tried to rise above her station and who has responded badly to her mistress's kindness. This also was in accordance with custom. In the code of Hammurabi the punishment for a servant girl who bears a child by her master and seeks to take advantage of the situation is that she be reduced again to the status of a slave.

The harsh treatment does not necessarily involve unfair treatment, it lay in the downgrading that necessarily followed with all that that involved. But Sarai was human and felt she had right on her side, thus it is probable that Hagar had a very hard time.

Hagar cannot accept her new lack of status or her treatment and flees in the direction of Egypt, her homeland. In many ways she had given Sarai little choice. (One of the things that is said to cause the earth to tremble is 'a handmaid who is heir to her mistress' (Proverbs 30.23)). Her attempt to supplant her had had to be treated harshly in order to re-establish Sarai's overt authority.

Of course her flight exacerbates her wrongdoing. She has no right to leave the tribe and she

has not been turned out. Had she stopped to consider earlier none of this would have happened. She must have known the customs, even though as an Egyptian she was unwilling to subscribe to them. But she had made a bid to rise above her station and the consequence of failure was inevitable.

Yet the narrative is very sympathetic to Hagar, even though according to every custom she was in the wrong. In the light of the fact that the covenant it witnesses to, and establishes, is with her and her seed, it is clear that it was written by a sympathiser in the tribe who records it for her at Abram's request (the whole narrative reveals what a strong minded woman she is).

16.7 'And the angel of Yahweh found her by a spring of water in the desert regions, by the spring on the way to Shur.'

There is no suggestion that she is in difficulties, (unlike the next time when she tries the same move under totally different circumstances (21.15-16)). As a young, healthy and determined woman she has made her way fairly easily and is almost on the borders of Egypt and safety. (For Shur as close to Egypt see Genesis 25.18; Exodus 15.22; 1 Samuel 27.8). But Yahweh has seen her flight and is cognisant of the fact that she carries Abram's son. Thus He will not allow her to flee into anonymity in Egypt, and He therefore seeks to restore her to Abram.

'The angel of Yahweh found her'. He had been sent on a specific mission and 'finds' her where he knows she is. The angel of Yahweh is a somewhat mysterious figure. In some ways he is distinguished from Yahweh, yet in others he is identified with Him. He is as it were an extension of Yahweh when a personal physical presence is required, just as the Spirit of God is seen as an extension of Yahweh when some remarkable invisible activity occurs. He is preparatory to the revelation of Jesus Christ as God's mediator with men.

16.8a 'And he said, "Hagar, handmaid of Sarai, from where have you come and where are you going?"'

It is clear that by becoming what she has Hagar has been brought within the covenant and that God will not let her go. But note that she is addressed as 'handmaid of Sarai' not wife of Abram. God accepts the customs of the people. Such an address from a stranger (angels are not usually recognised as such immediately) alerts her to the fact that this is an unusual visitation. Yet it also reminds her she is in the wrong. She 'belongs' to Sarai and the tribe.

'From where have you come?' He wants her to recognise that she shares in an unusually favourable circumstance, that of being within Yahweh's covenant. And she is deserting it.

'Where are you going?' He also asks her to face the question as to what kind of a future there is for her and her child if she continues on her way. Life in Egypt will not be easy for a solitary woman with child. But the writer also wants us to recognise that she is, as it were, leaving the presence of God.

16.8b 'And she said, "I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai".'

Hagar must have been appalled that at this stage, when she has nearly reached safety, she has met someone who knows her status. She does not try to avoid the question or lie. She admits her guilt.

16.9 'And the angel of Yahweh said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit yourself to her hands."'

That is the human side. She must acknowledge her status and do what is right accordingly. But

in return her future is guaranteed.

16.10 'And the angel of Yahweh said to her, "I will greatly multiply your seed so that it will be so great that it cannot be numbered".'

If she returns her future will be most satisfying. She will become the mother of a great multitude, the longing in those days of every woman. We note here that the angel of Yahweh speaks as God.

16.11 'And the angel of Yahweh said to her, "Behold you are with child and will bear a son. And you shall call his name Ishmael, because Yahweh has heard your affliction. And he will be like a wild ass among men. His hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him. And he will dwell in the presence of all his brethren".'

The covenant is split into three parts, each introduced by the phrase 'the angel of Yahweh said to her'. This is deliberate. Three is the number of completeness and the covenant is thus recognised as being totally complete in itself.

The promise of a son is what she longed for and its fulfilment would seal the covenant. The name Ishmael means 'God hears'. It will ever be a reminder to her that God knows her situation and has provided for her. She is under His protection and He will hear her cry.

'He will be a wild ass of a man.' See Job 39.5-8. God of course knows that Ishmael cannot inherit leadership of the tribe for He knows that Isaac will be born. Thus this is a prophecy before the event. Like his mother, Ishmael will be strongminded and unwilling to submit willingly to others. The idea is that he will not be satisfied with his position in the tribe but will roam the desert places, free from all restraint and control, answerable to no one except God, and able there to do whatever he wishes. Yet he must have contact with others and they will view him as 'not one of us'. The inevitable result will at times be conflict. To others he will appear lawless. But his brethren will always be aware that he is there. Even when not seen he will be 'in their presence', never to be overlooked, a typical Bedouin, sweeping in and out of their lives. He will be like his mother, a free spirit, unwilling to be dominated and very resolute.

It should be noted that this promise assumes that there will be a second leaving of the tribe. The so-called 'doublet' of 21.9-21 is in fact therefore simply a fulfilment of this prophecy.

16.13 'And she called the name of Yahweh Who spoke to her, "You are El Roi ('the God Who sees')", for she said, "Have I even here looked after Him Who sees me?"'

She gives God a new name as being her personal God, for He has seen her need and has responded. She knows that she has met the One Who sees her always. These words emphasise how dramatic her experience has been. She knows she has experienced a theophany. From now on she is not only within Yahweh's covenant with Abram, she also has her own personal covenant. Yet that personal covenant is within the greater covenant and acknowledged by Abram.

'Looked after' i.e. followed with her eyes. The suggestion is that she saw a partial revelation of Yahweh other than just the appearance of the angel of Yahweh in human form (compare Judges 13.20; Exodus 33.17-23).

16.14 'For this reason the well was called Beer-lahai-roi ('the well of the Living One Who sees me'). Consider, it is between Kadesh and Bered.'

We do not know whether this was a new name for the site or an old name applied to a new situation. It is possible that the name was originally given because it had been a lifesaver to someone who had arrived there in great need who gave credit to 'the Living One' for deliverance. Alternately it could mean 'the well of he who sees me and lives' referring to the well. It had no doubt been a lifesaver to many. But either way the name is given a significance, or a new significance, through Hagar's experience. If the name was old it was taken over and converted so that it represented Hagar's God.

'Between Kadesh and Bered' identifies its position to those unfamiliar with it, and shows the writer, or someone who added the description as a subsequent guide, knew it well.

The fact that this record is favourable to Hagar and yet retained in the covenant records of the tribe which became Israel, confirms its ancient origin. It was clearly recorded and kept in the tribe at a time when Hagar and Ishmael were an integral part of that tribe, and the probability must be that when Hagar returned to the tribe the covenant was immediately recorded as a part of God's covenant with Abram, by a sympathetic scribe selected by Abram.

God Expands His Covenant With Abram Under the Sign of Circumcision and Promises Prosperity to All his Descendants and a Son to Abram (Abraham) Born of Sarai (Sarah) (16.15-17.27).

Events have gone forward and with the birth of Ishmael things have become more complicated, so Yahweh now renews His covenant with Abram, bringing in Ishmael and promising the blessing of the birth of peoples and nations through him as well, while at the same time signifying that the promised line will be through a son of Sarai. This is thus an advancement on previous covenants. But at the same time the position of Ishmael within the covenant situation is made clear. He will enjoy the blessings of the wider covenant, but the original more direct and personal covenant is with Isaac (verse 21).

This change in emphasis is made clear in a number of ways. Both Abram and Sarai have their names changed, a sign of a new beginning, and Yahweh speaks as 'El Shaddai' because He is speaking to a wider group than the original 'chosen line', speaking to some for whom He will not be Yahweh, the personal covenant God.

16.15-6 'And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. And Abram was eighty six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.'

The end result of Sarai's planning was the birth of a son to Abram. Now his steward was no longer his direct heir for he had a son of his own. In obedience to God's words to Hagar (verse 11) he called his son Ishmael.

This birth took place when he was 86 years old. This figure is made up of 75 (12.4) plus 10 (16.3) plus the period to Ishmael's birth. As with all numbers in Genesis it is not necessarily to be taken literally. As we have seen both the 75 and the 10 may well be expressive of ideas rather than intended as literal numbers. Thus the 86 could well be simply a composite number resulting from these two previous numbers. Its purpose here is to bring out Ishmael's age at the birth of Isaac when compared with one hundred. (The ancients used numbers to express ideas rather than just for numerical purposes. It is questionable whether they even bothered to keep a record of age, working simply on an approximate basis. Consider how many of the ages given end either with 0, 5 or 7)).

17.1-2 'And when Abram was ninety nine years old Yahweh appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am El Shaddai (God Almighty). Walk before me and be perfect and I will make my covenant between me and you and will multiply you greatly".'

Again the number is significant. It indicates that the miracle heir will be born when Abram is 'one hundred', in other words at God's perfect timing.

(Note however that Abraham can at the same time describe himself as 'a hundred years old' (17.17 - compare 17.24). We must not tie the ancients down to our exact methods of using numbers. They indicated a different thing by them).

'I am El Shaddai' - 'God Almighty' - the One Who is 'competent' to perform what He promises. Previously God's covenant has been with His chosen people as Yahweh. But now He will make a covenant that includes other peoples and other nations. To them therefore He is El Shaddai, 'God Almighty'. Previously every covenant has been from 'Yahweh', and very personal, now Yahweh reveals Himself as not just Lord of one nation but of many nations.

This has, of course, been implicit in what has been revealed to Abram previously, but now it is made explicit. He is not only Yahweh, their personal God, but El Shaddai, God over all. He will not only govern the destiny of the chosen nation but of other related nations too to whom He will not be known as Yahweh. This will include the descendants of Ishmael, and also later of the Edomites and the sons of Keturah (25.1 on). And to ratify this covenant an outward sign that can be seen by all nations is introduced, circumcision on the eighth day.

'Walk before me and be perfect ---'. Enoch and Noah walked *with* God (5.22; 6.9). Those were days when the presence of God was more intimately known than now. Now Abram can only walk before God as God watches over him. Being 'perfect' means walking within the covenant stipulations, fulfilling all God's requirements, being a faithful liegeman (compare Deuteronomy 18.13).

'I will make my covenant with you ---'. Abram is already a man of the covenant. But the birth of Ishmael indicates the necessity for a wider and broader covenant. Abram has failed in faith and pre-empted God. Now God calls him back to obedience and will establish a wider covenant which will include Ishmael and his promised seed. Of course, while Ishmael is with the family tribe Yahweh watches over him. But once he leaves he will come under the provenance of God as El, -- El Roi (16.13), El Shaddai.

Here the impression given is that it is Abram's obedience that will result in the blessing. But we must not forget that the blessing has already been guaranteed in response to Abram's faith (15.6). Thus we have the perfect example of the fact that God's covenant is made with us as a gift of grace in response to faith, but that as a result obedience is expected through which the blessing will be received. Genuine faith will always produce obedience ('works').

As in chapter 15 Abram is the passive receiver of the covenant. It is Yahweh, El Shaddai, Who determines its content and promises. It is the Great King Who speaks to His liegeman. And yet Abram is more than a liegeman, he is the chosen of Yahweh.

17.3-4 'And Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him saying, "As for me, behold my covenant is with you and you will be the father of a multitude of nations".'

The presence of Yahweh is so real and awe-inspiring that Abram 'falls on his face' as before a great king (compare 17.22 - which demonstrates that this is a genuine theophany). The title 'God' is used because Yahweh is here representing Himself as 'God Almighty' (El Shaddai). So throughout this passage He is spoken of as 'God', that is 'El Shaddai' for it reaches beyond those who worship Him as Yahweh.

17.5 "Neither shall your name any more be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations."

The change of name indicates a new beginning. Now the thought is of more than one nation. The name 'Abram' is found in many contemporary ancient texts, often in the form 'Abi-ram' - 'my father is Ram - the exalted One', it may also mean 'my father is exalted'. The name 'Abraham' is also similarly found and may mean 'father of a multitude' but there is a typical play on words rather than the name necessarily meaning that. Thus the name change, although being an alternative form rather than a new name, (it is like changing Steve to Stephen), indicates the extending of the promises to Abram.

17.6 "And I will make you exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of you and kings shall come from you."

Now it is more than one nation that will come out of Abram and his seed, and the added promise is made of 'kings', rulers of peoples, re-emphasising the extension of the promise to many peoples so that there will be many tribes. It is to miss the point to see this as directly a prophecy of the Davidic kingship, although later readers would read it so. This is not as specific as that. It is the natural result of a man in Abram's position producing many tribes and peoples necessitating many rulers. Not one nation but many. And his descendants will rule over them. This reaches its final culmination when all nations are Abraham's seed in Christ the king and all the nations of the world are blessed (12.3).

17.7 "And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your seed after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be a God to you and to your seed after you."

Here God makes explicit what has previously been implicit, that the covenant is with, and includes, all generations of his seed to come. It is a covenant that will never cease. God will never cease to be their God. The covenant is permanent and 'everlasting'.

'Me and you and your seed after you --'. The latter is repeated three times to confirm the completeness of the covenant. His descendants are now specifically brought in to the covenant. But there is still a stress on Abraham's favoured position. His descendants are blessed because of him. His seed includes all his seed, the nations that will spring from him.

17.8 "And I will give to you, and to your seed after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, and I will be their God."

At present they are dwellers in the land, but much of the land is owned by others. They are sojourners, they merely have 'temporary residence rights'. But one day his descendants will own and possess the land in the name of Almighty God Who can do whatever He will. There may be a hint here that Abraham has been becoming concerned about the fact that his reception of the land has seemed to be delayed. This stresses that God has not overlooked him.

And He will be God to them. His sovereign power will be exerted on their behalf and He will rule over them receiving their homage and worship. It is interesting that in Exodus 3-6 the reverse situation applies. Here, as Yahweh, He is revealing Himself in the name 'El Shaddai' as the God Who is over all because His new covenant includes those outside the original covenant who will not be part of that covenant until all nations are blessed in Abram. In Exodus He Who is their God (El Shaddai), as they dwell outside the land, Who will also reveal Himself as the God of the covenant, as Yahweh, as 'the One Who is there', acting in history in the actual fulfilling of the promises by possession of the land.

17.9-11 'And God said to Abraham, "And as for you, you will keep my covenant, you and your seed after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant that you shall keep between me and you and your seed after you, every male among you shall be circumcised. And you

shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it will be a token of a covenant between me and you”.’

In chapter 15 a sign was given to Abram in the form of a covenant ceremony where the blood of animals was shed to seal the covenant. Here that is replaced by the shedding of blood in person in each one who would enter the covenant. By being specifically circumcised with a view to membership in the covenant community they showed their response to God's covenant with His people and their commitment to the God of the covenant.

We note here that the respective positions are made clear. It is God Who ‘establishes’ the covenant (verse 7). It is Abraham who ‘keeps’ it (verses 9-10). Circumcision is not the making of a covenant but the response to a covenant already established by God.

The rite, which was restricted to males, was to be carried out on the eighth day after birth (verse 12) although any male who was uncircumcised and who wished to join the covenant community at any age was also required to be circumcised whether slave or free (verses 12-13).

We have unintentional confirmation of how ancient this ceremony is in Joshua 3.5 where we are told that Joshua used flint knives for the performance of the rite at a time when the use of metal was well known. It is clear from that that the ceremony was seen as so sacred that the original methods had to be followed. Moses' failure to circumcise his son led to almost fatal illness until the situation was remedied (Exodus 4.24-26). Again a flint was used. At the Exodus it is stipulated that the Feast of the Passover could only be celebrated by circumcised males (Exodus 12.44, 48).

Circumcision was an ancient institution not limited to the family tribe of Abraham and was practised in Egypt in the Old Kingdom period. But there it was carried out during boyhood rather than at infancy. A sixth dynasty Egyptian tomb relief depicts a boy being circumcised and two prisoners of a Canaanite king depicted on a 12th century BC Megiddo ivory were also circumcised. But it is clear that in Abraham's family tribe general circumcision was not practised up to this point, and it was not generally practised in Mesopotamia from where Abraham came. Modern medicine has shown the value of circumcision in protecting the health of those who live in semi-desert conditions as it helps to prevent foreign bodies becoming trapped under the foreskin.

Later the peoples round Israel are also seen to be in the main circumcised for the Philistines are disparagingly marked down as ‘the uncircumcised Philistines’ (Judges 14.3; 15.18), because their state was considered unusual and despised. How far this arose from connection with the covenant with Abraham (and later Moses) and how far from Egyptian and other influence we do not know. It is to be noted that the inhabitants of Shechem were recognised as being uncircumcised at the time of Jacob (Genesis 34). Thus we have here an example, as later with the sacrificial system, of a more general practise which is taken over and given specific meaning.

Circumcision would also become the symbol of the need for a purified heart - see Deuteronomy 10.16; 30.6; Jeremiah 9.25-26. Just as ritual circumcision was the outward sign of entry into the covenant, so ‘spiritual circumcision’ signified a genuine commitment of the heart to God's covenant and obedience to His commands. Without the latter the former was meaningless. Moses spoke of himself as having ‘uncircumcised lips’ (Exodus 6.12, 30). This is probably metaphorical and demonstrates early usage of such an idea. It may mean that Pharaoh would see him as inferior, or be a reference to his lack of ability as an orator. It is signifying that he is not fit to do the task required.

17.12-14 “And he who is eight days old will be circumcised among you, every male throughout

your generations, he who is born in the house or bought with wealth from any stranger, who is not of your seed. He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your wealth must necessarily be circumcised, and my covenant will be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that soul shall be cut off from his people. He has broken my covenant."

To share in the benefits of God's covenant circumcision is now required. It becomes the symbol of response to and commitment to the covenant. It applies to all, both slave and free. This is confirmation that even the lowest of the low in the family tribe were seen as within God's covenant and therefore as His people. Refusal would mean excommunication or worse, but this is an emphasis on the totality of the requirement rather than being given as a practical alternative. It is not really facing people with a choice. The one who refused would be revealing himself as deliberately blaspheming God, but there is always the possibility of those who will take an extreme position. Compare the seriousness with which Moses' lapse was treated (Exodus 4.24-26).

We note again here how the covenant community was made up of nationals from many nations.

17.15 'And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you will not call her name Sarai, but her name shall be Sarah (princess)."

The new name again stresses a new beginning in a new situation. Sarah is to share in Abraham's honour and her position as the producer of the chosen line is emphasised. She is given a new dignity and brought directly into the covenant, receiving a personal blessing. (Sarai is probably simply an older form of Sarah. It is the change of name and not the change of meaning that is significant).

17.16 "And I will bless her and give you a son from her. Yes, I will bless her and she shall be a mother (princess?) of nations, kings of peoples shall be of her."

God declares that Sarah is to have a natural son in spite of her age, and that she too will have nations and kings who will look back to her as their source. There is no word for 'mother' in the original, it has to be read in. On the basis of the name change and the context it may be that 'princess' is the idea to be read in. Not just a mother but a mother-princess. The promise is of course an extension of the promise to Abraham.

17.17 'Then Abraham fell on his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, "Shall a child be born to him who is a hundred years old, and shall Sarah who is ninety years old produce a child?" And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you".'

The writer makes clear that Abraham's faith falters. He is clearly possessed with a mixture of emotions. At the words he expressly renews his attitude of obedient submission, he 'falls on his face' (compare verse 3). But he laughs. The laughter may well be in his heart as are the words. The context shows that it means he is incredulous (compare 18.12). Whoever heard of such a thing?

(This was Abraham's view. It is of course possible for a hundred year old vigorous man to beget a child. Who can say what was possible with a healthy but barren 90 year old woman who was still vigorous and would live to 127, at a time when longevity was more the norm so that the ageing process was clearly slower? But we are told that her periods have ceased - 18.11. Whether this was to be a specific miracle or just an unusual scientific phenomena we are not told).

'Oh that Ishmael might live before you'. We cannot avoid the suggestion here that Abraham actually sees God as mistaken. Abraham himself has understandably lost hope. He does not want to have to wait any longer. He tells God that he is willing to accept Ishmael as the fulfilment of God's promise. How often we accept second best because the best seems impossible.

'And God said, "No. Sarah your wife will bear a son, and you will call his name Isaac (which means 'laughter'). And I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his seed after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold I have blessed him and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him greatly. Twelve princes will he beget and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant will I establish with Isaac whom Sarah will bear to you at this set time in the next year".'

God understands Abraham's doubts and confirms exactly what He has promised. Sarah will genuinely have a child of her own. The name 'laughter' unquestionably has in mind the fact that Abraham laughed in his heart, but it also has in mind the joy that the child will bring, not only to Abraham and Sarah but to the world. His sceptical laughter will be turned into so great a joyous laughter, that in the end the first laughter is forgotten.

So the name Isaac signifies 'do not doubt my promises' but it also means 'from him blessings will abound'.

It is now made clear that the basic covenant for the chosen line is with Isaac. But this will withhold nothing from Ishmael. He too is part of the wider covenant and will produce a nation and be the father of rulers. Indeed he will parallel Isaac. Twelve rulers will descend from him. (Twelve was another number that contained within it the idea of tribal completeness. As we shall see later twelve was looked on as the ideal tribal confederation). Yet the use of 'prince' (nasi) rather than 'king' (melek) may hint at a slightly less exalted level of blessing, although alternately it may more reflect Ishmael's prophesied type of lifestyle (16.12). Bedouins did not have 'kings'. And it is only through Isaac that 'all the nations of the world will be blessed' (12.3).

God now commits Himself as to time. Abraham does not have long to wait. Isaac will be born in a year's time. This time note tallies with 17.1 demonstrating that this section is a genuine part of this whole covenant narrative and not a later insertion.

17.22 'And he left off talking with him, and God went up from Abraham.'

The order in the second phrase suggests that the first phrase means it was God Who left off talking with Abraham. The covenant was complete. Its various ramifications had been explained. Now the theophany ceases.

'God went up ---'. Compare 35.13; Judges 13.20. This indicates the end of a theophany. God departs, but not to another place. He leaves this world for His own abode, away from this world. His activity in this world is over for the present. It reminds us that Abraham received more than messages in his heart. He experienced the visible, awe-inspiring presence of God.

17.23 'And Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all who were born in his house, and all who were bought with his wealth, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin on the selfsame day as God had said to him.'

Abraham obeyed immediately. No doubt he gathered the men together and explained the wonderful theophany he had experienced and described the terms of the covenant, and then the ceremony would take place as a dedication to the God of the covenant. But what matters is

that the demands were fulfilled. Then the covenant was put into writing and the following final verses are the confirmation of the fulfilment of the demands of the covenant.

17.24-27 'And Abraham was ninety nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, and Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. In the selfsame day was Abraham circumcised and Ishmael his son, and all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with wealth from the stranger, were circumcised with him.'

Ishmael is mentioned separately as one named in the covenant. His age shows that he is at the beginning of manhood and thus old enough to participate in a covenant meaningfully. So ends another covenant record. But this time a covenant including Ishmael and offered to a number of nations. It is significant that the circumcision of the final one of the trio, Isaac, is also recorded. It is found in 21.4, the only other mention in Genesis of an individual's circumcision.