

THE RENEWAL OF THE CALL OF ABRAHAM

I. Having left Melchizedek, Abram then encounters God again and receives a new promise from Him, but with a challenge and terrifying darkness.

A. Despite his recent victory, it appears Abram is fearful, for God's first words to Him are "fear not."

1. Abram may have been fearful of the ramifications of becoming involved in international politics, with the potential of empires from the east now turning on him. Or, having met the seemingly timeless Melchizedek, he recognizes now even more his own mortality.

2. In any case, God both gives him assurances of protection with the words "I am your shield" and reassures him that his reward will be great.

a. The analogy of God as the shield of His people would be a repeated theme in Jewish worship, particularly in reference to God's protection of His people against enemies. See, e.g., Ps. 3:4, 18:3, 31, 33:20, 115:9-11. St. Paul will pick up on this theme describing faith as a shield in combat against the devil. See Eph. 6:16.

b. Jesus would take up the promise of a reward being great in the last of the beatitudes, for those who are persecuted. The idea is that the reward comes not from success but from suffering and trial. See Matt. 5:11-12.

B. Abram, for the first time, responds to God with a protest, here because he is childless and thus will not have his own heir.

1. He appears to believe that God will make his name great, but only through his general group, not his own children. Childlessness was considered a curse among all the ancient peoples, but especially among the Jews. See, e.g., Gen. 30:23; 1 Sam. 1:1-8; Luke 1:25. So important was having children that the Deuteronomical law called for the brother of one who dies childless to raise children in his name. See Duet. 25:5-10. The Book of Wisdom, written shortly before the time

of Christ, assures the reader that those who are, without fault, childless, will be greatly blessed by God. See Wis. 3:13-4:6. But that assurance was needed precisely because people often asked why God would allow a just woman to be without children.

2. God does not rebuke Abram, but makes him a glorious promise, that he will have more descendants than the stars of the sky. The previous promise referred to the dust of the earth; now the sign is in the heavens.

3. Here, critically, Abraham places faith in God. The next line contains an ambiguity. It can read either "He [God] credited it to him [Abram] as an act of righteousness" or "he [Abram] credited it to Him [God] as an act of righteousness." The ambiguity is perhaps deliberate; there is a mutual trust.

a. As read in the first way, this line, in verse 6 of chapter 15, will have an extensive subsequent history.

b. St. Paul cites it as evidence of the fact that faith itself justifies before there is any good work. It is the faith that gives righteousness, not any act of Abraham. See Rom. 4:1-13; Gal. 3:1-6.

c. However, St. James connects this passage with the later offer of Isaac and argues that faith must be completed by good works, and is dead without it. See James 2:10-24.

d. Martin Luther would use the passage in Romans very heavily in arguing for salvation by faith alone. In response, the Council of Trent would argue from the letter of James that faith does justify before any good works, but that one must then cooperate by good works, which increase the merit of faith. See Council of Trent, Decree on Justification chapters VIII-XI.

e. This verse contains the first mention of righteousness in the Bible. This idea of being faithful, staying on the

right path, remaining true, will be a continual one.

5. Interestingly, even after Abram puts his faith in God, the dialogue continues.

a. God makes it clear that He was the one who called Abram's father from Ur. Chapter 11 had not actually said it was God who was calling Terah out of Ur, but rather only that he left. Here, however, God makes it clear that that departure was no accident, even though Abram may not have seen God's hand at work at the time. God's hand is usually at work in a person's life long before he perceives it. Here also God uses the term "Yahweh" for the first time to Abram.

f. Despite his profession of faith, Abram still wants a sign that he will have the land, the second great blessing. As often the case with faith, such as Zechariah and the father of the possessed boy with Jesus, it is still not perfect, wanting at least a sign. See Mark 9:24; Luke 1:18.

C. God responds to this request for a sign with a mystical, but terrifying experience for Abram, with a glorious, but also harsh, promise.

1. God calls for Abram to begin with a customary ritual, bring four three-year old animals as a sacrifice, dividing the heifer, the ram and goat, but not the pigeon.

a. According to Robert Sacks, the goat symbolizes a ruler, the heifer the priests, the ram the average person, and the dove the poor. The variance is in accordance with the cost and rarity of the animal. See Leon Kaas, *The Beginning of Wisdom* 304 f.n.8. Other commentators elevate the dove, who cannot be divided, as a symbol of the spirit.

b. The divided animals are a symbol that the parties would rather be torn in two than violate the covenant. They pass through that symbol indicating their unity.

2. A deep, terrifying trance comes upon Abram. The experience of God is at once glorious, and yet overwhelming to human nature, leading to a rightful fear and trembling.
  
3. God begins His promise with a warning, that the descendants of Abram will be enslaved for 400 years.
  - a. The number 400 may be more literal, or simply is figure for a very long time, being ten times a full generation. Whether it is literal or not could change the date of the departure into Egypt significantly. Some commentators argue that the "fourth time-span" refers to four generations, thus indicating a much less time in Egypt, although the four time spans may refer to centuries, which was the age of Abraham when Isaac was born.
  
  - b. The promise is that, after the time in slavery, they will be freed and come back to the land in glory. Strangely, the prediction is that they will be brought back precisely when the Amorites are at the height of their wickedness. The Amorites were a tribe that lived across the Jordan River from Israel, and were continual enemies of the Chosen People when they were led by Moses and then Joshua. See Num. 21:21-31; Josh. 10:1-19. There is an implication that evil will be allowed to grow so that it can be more thoroughly defeated.
  
  - c. God promises Abram that his life will be in peace and he will "join your forefathers in peace." At one level, this phrase is simply a euphemism for death; but at another level, there is a hint of an afterlife with his ancestors.
  
4. God Himself, under the appearance of a fire, passes through the split carcasses, indicating His promise, presumably as Abram does the same. God is willing to speak to people in their own terms and commit Himself. The scene

shows both God's power and His humility in willing to deal with Abram as his own level.

II. Abram and Sarai then try to take matters into their own hands by having Abram conceive a child through Hagar.

A. It seems likely that Abram and Sarai acquired Hagar during their sojourn in Egypt.

B. Sarai is understandably distressed at her lack of children, which she attributes to the Lord. And she no doubt wonders how God will fulfill His promises to Abram.

1. She may have been worried that Abram would take another wife to have children. One ancient law code said that, in such a case where the wife is barren, the husband shall not take a wife, but should instead have a child through the wife's handmaid. See New Jerome Biblical Commentary, "Genesis" 14:25. That is exactly what Sarai is proposing.
2. In any case, she and Abram do not turn to God in prayer, but instead resort to a tactic common in the ancient world, using effectively a surrogate mother.
3. The text, while not overtly condemning the arrangement, seems to present Abram in the role of Adam, adhering to his wife's recommendations without consideration or prayer. There is also a connection with the episode in Egypt, in which Abram encouraged Sarai to a polygamous relationship with the Pharaoh out of fear for his life. Here Sarai encourages Abram to a polygamous relationship out of fear of infertility. In both cases, there is a lack of trust in God.

4. The text dates the event to ten years after the departure from Haran to the Promised Land. And thus, Abram would be 85 at this point.
- C. The arrangement quickly falls apart as Hagar now has an advantage that Sarai does not, being not only a mother, but (apparently) the mother of the heir to God's promises.
1. Far from being built up, Sarai is forced downward, and unreasonably blames it on Abram and Hagar. Again, there is a connection here to Adam who blamed the Fall on God and Eve.
  2. Abram once again tries unsuccessfully to keep the peace by allowing an injustice, namely, the mistreatment of Hagar.
- D. Before even giving birth, Hagar flees into the wilderness, where God proclaims His care for her and her child.
1. God send His "messenger," who is an angel. As with other angels, the vision is almost interchangeable with an experience with God Himself, as verse 13 makes clear.
    - In Hebrew, Greek and Latin, the term for angel (mal'akh, aggelos or angelus) also means messenger. The Bible sometimes goes back and forth between the meanings. See, e.g., Mark 1:2-3 (referring to John the Baptist as the Lord's messenger, with a quote from Malachi that plainly refers to angels.)
  2. The angel first gives Hagar a chance to describe her condition, which she does plainly and simply, in contrast to the machinations elsewhere.
  3. As with the mixed promise to Abram regarding his descendants inheriting the land, but only after 400 years of oppression, the angel gives a mixed (but in the end glorious) promise to Abram and Hagar's descendants.

- a. First, the angel promises that her descendants will, like Abram's descendants by Sarai, be too numerous to count.
  - b. Second, the angel gives the child a name. The fact that God Himself gives the name, which in this case, means "God has heard" confers a special prominence on the child.
  - c. However, there is also a burden that comes for the child, for he will be a "wild ass of a man" and be at continual conflict with his kin, which among others, will be the other descendants of Abram through Isaac. The fact that he has received a blessing from God creates a situation in which he cannot simply live as others.
  - d. A similar problem would develop between the Jews and Samaritan. The latter group were partially descendants of Israel, but had also intermixed with Assyrians and others after the fall of the Northern Kingdom to Assyria in 721 B.C. Precisely because the Jews and Samaritans were related and lived next to each other, but held to different traditions, they feuded from about 500 B.C. into Christ's own life.
- E. Hagar wonders at the fact that she could see God (albeit through an angel) and still live. She has an intuitive understanding of the awesomeness and overwhelming majesty of God. The Jews would generally come to believe that, unless God gave a special gift, no one could see God and live. See, e.g., Duet. 5:24-25, 18:16; Judges 6:22-24, 13:21-23. Here, Hagar receives this gift and thus names the place accordingly as Beer-la-hai-roi, which means either "well of the living one" or "well of living vision."
- This place is near Kadesh, which is north of the Sea of Galilee, at the northernmost part of what will become the nation of Israel. The family of Laban and Rachel, a brother and sister who are grandchildren of Abraham's brother, Nahor will settle there. Isaac will travel there and marry Rachel. See Gen. 24:62.
- F. The chapter closes with the birth of Ishmael, clearly reaffirmed as the son of Abram. Although God has already given

Ishmael his name, Abram also names him. Despite the flawed way in which Ishmael was conceived, God is still working through Abram to give him blessings.

III. After thirteen years, the narrative picks up again with God blessing Abram even more, changing his name, promising him many nations through Isaac, and calling for the covenant to be reaffirmed through circumcision.

A. At this point, Ishmael is thirteen, which would be a common age for a young man to start being called an adult. Circumcision at about the age of thirteen was a common rite of passage in ancient Near Eastern cultures, as it is among Muslims today.

B. God begins by referring to Himself as God Almighty (El-Shaddai), the first use of that term in the Bible. The phrase El-Shaddai tends to be associated with the mystery of God. See Gen. 36:11; Ex. 6:3; Job 5:17, 8:3-5, 22:3-26; 40:2. The Book of Revelation uses the term God Almighty (in Greek, but with a Hebrew background) frequently, especially with reference to the worship given to God and the judgment of God, all of which ends in the peace of the heavenly Jerusalem. See Rev. 1:8, 4:8, 11:17, 15:3, 16:7, 14; 19:15; 21:22.

C. God promises again an eternal covenant, with the moral basis that Abram is to walk in His presence blamelessly. The ritual aspect (emphasized before with the ritual in chapter 15 and later with circumcision) is combined with the moral law. This combination, central in Jewish thought, is not universal. Many religions in the ancient Near East, and even now in the West, have very little in the way of a moral code. And many moral codes, such as those of the ancient Aristotelians, Platonists, and Stoics, as well as modern Enlightenment era philosophies such as those of Hume, Kant, and John Stuart Mill have no religious connection.

D. At this point, Abram cannot walk before God, but simply prostrates himself. In response to that humility, God promises him glory. There are three aspects to the promise and one action required by Abraham.

1. God now changes Abram's name to Abraham, meaning a "father of many nations." Through Ishmael, and later through Isaac's son Esau, many other nations would spring from Abram, now Abraham. The idea is that his blessings would be enjoyed, not only by what would be the Israelites, but also by nations throughout the world. The Psalms and prophets would anticipate the day when all nations would come before the new Jerusalem. See, e.g., Ps. 87:4-6; Is. 60:10-14, 66:18-21. We now see the fulfillment of that promise in the Church.



- There is also the promise of many kings from Abraham; the notion of kingdom is a strong one for the Jews and Christians, although the king should not be like that of other nations. See, e.g., Duet. 17:14-20; John 18:36-37.
- In this promise especially, there is a continual repetition of the word "you," and "your," with twelve instances of the former and five of the latter in six verses. There is a great emphasis on the centrality of Abraham to God's plans

2. God also reiterates His promise of a land and a lasting covenant, but adds that it will be an "everlasting covenant." Despite all the sinfulness of man, God's love will make His covenant last. In His sacrifice on Calvary, Jesus took the old rituals and made them the final and eternal covenant. See Heb. 8-9.

3. God promises Abraham that the covenant will be through his son by Sarai, whose name God changes to the more precise Sarah.

a. Abraham is skeptical of this promise because of the seeming physical impossibility. He inwardly laughs and outwardly lessens Gods own offer, saying that it will be enough for the promises to be through Ishmael. Strangely, he seems to think that he must let God out of His extravagant promises.

b. God's reaction to Abraham is not harsh, but does repudiate him. First, because of Abraham's laughter, the son will be called Isaac, which is derived from the Hebrew words for "May God laugh." Isaac will, in his very name, be a continual reminder that the ways of God seem foolish to human beings, but that God laughs at human scheming. See Ps. 2:1-4; 1 Cor. 1:18-25. Children are ever God's response to human skepticism and worldly plans, upsetting both of them.

c. God promises that Ishmael, whom Abraham plainly loves, will himself be blessed and become the father of twelve chieftains. Ishmael's line will actually get a generational jump on the line of Isaac, whose son Jacob will be the father of twelve patriarchs. Chapter 25 will list the twelve sons of Ishmael, and indicate that they spread throughout a vast part of Arabia. Muslims to this day consider themselves to be descendants of Ishmael.

4. On Abraham and his heirs' part, God required circumcision as a sign of the covenant. God was taking a common ritual and moving it into infancy, at eight days.

- a. Part of the idea is that consecration does not begin when the child reaches what was then called manhood, but is there from the beginning.
- b. The circumcision was required for all males in Abram's company, including even foreigners who came freely or as slaves.
- c. Circumcision is both a personal and familial act and also ritual one. There is a connection to generative powers, but not one that is itself sexual. Thus, God is taking a common rite of the time and making it work for His purposes.

D. Abraham once again shows his faithfulness by carrying out the circumcision. The text emphasizes his own actions, but his people (whose males presumably numbered over 500) must have cooperated.

- The fact that he could even make such a proposal to his people demonstrates the risks he was willing to take in order to please God. The fact that Abraham could command such loyalty is astonishing and testifies to the faith his people had in him.