

BREAD OF LIFE TORAH STUDIES

I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall never hunger... John 6:35

GENESIS 15-17

Abram's calling will lead him through a series of tests. The rescue of Lot at the Battle of the Kings was one such test, which Abram passed admirably – turning down an earthly reward offered by the King of Sodom, while receiving blessing including bread and wine, from Melchizedek – righteous King of Salem/Peace.

CHAPTER 15 – The Covenantal Promise

As if in direct response to this victory, we read: *After these things the Word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision ...* This is the fourth time the LORD engages Abraham. Chapter 15 is entirely taken up by a dialogue between Abram and the LORD, as He reaffirms the promises given earlier and again expands upon them, this time sealing the promise with a blood covenant. There are a few firsts in this text: 1) it's the first time the 'Word of the LORD' came; 2) first mention of a *vision*, (Did the "Living Word" appear to him?) 3) First use of the phrase "fear not".

The LORD then gives Abram two reasons for not fearing: *I am your shield and your exceeding great reward.* What then is Abram's fear? He reveals it in his response to God: *What will you give me, seeing I go childless?* This is also the first verbal response we hear from Abram.

Materially, Abram lacked nothing. There is no meaningful reward God could give if he remains childless. We can imagine this question weighing on Abram's mind since God gave him the promise of land *and* descendants. He is trying to figure out how this can possibly come about since it seems impossible in the natural. Maybe his loyal servant Eliezer, who was born in his house, will receive his inheritance?¹ The LORD assures him that his servant Eliezer will not be his heir, but one that comes forth from his own loins shall be his heir. Furthermore, the number of his offspring is now compared to the stars in the heavens. Earlier his seed had been compared to the dust of the earth, and later, to the sand of the seashore – all of which are incalculable.

Having received God's assurance, Abram now believed that the prophecy would certainly be fulfilled - *He believed in the LORD and He accounted it to him for righteousness* (v6). What was accounted to him for righteousness? - His faith! The power of faith is at work in Abram, allowing him to see and believe beyond what he previously could. He now believed that the promises of both the seed and the land would come to pass by an act of grace. God Himself would see to it.

Even as far back as Abraham, righteousness was imputed through faith, not simply obedience to Laws. This is foundational teaching, and is reiterated by Paul in Romans 4:1-12. **(Read & discuss)**

The Covenantal Ritual

God is a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God and by means of a covenantal ritual, the Abrahamic Covenant was officially sealed. Animals were brought by Abram, divided and laid out in preparation. *And when the birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away* – birds of the air represent that which seeks to 'devour' our faith.

¹ According to ancient engravings, a childless couple were free to adopt their slave in order to have an heir.

A *deep sleep* fell upon Abram. It was the same supernatural deep sleep that fell upon Adam when Eve was brought forth. We can see it as a laying down of the life of the flesh and allowing God to work his will in our innermost being. However, horror and deep darkness also fell upon him as God spoke to him about things to come: 13 *Then He said to Abram: "Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years."*

Q. Why do you think God announced here, the dark road ahead for Abram's descendants?

¹⁷ *When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch² passed between these pieces.* ¹⁸ *On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,*

The normal procedure was for both persons making the covenant to walk between the pieces of the animals, rendering the terms of the covenant binding on both parties. If one party broke the covenant it was no longer binding on the other. But Abram's lack of involvement here emphasizes the unconditional sealing of this covenant by God Himself. No matter how often Abram's seed fails, this covenant cannot be made null and void.

DISCUSS the importance and uniqueness of God being a God of Covenant.

CHAPTER 16 - The Birth of Ishmael – read 16:11-16

I would like you to read the first 6 verses of this chapter very carefully and discuss each verse; ask questions of it; notice any repetitions; be alert to any scriptures elsewhere in the Bible that resonate with what you read; hurt, jealousy, resentment, power-plays... What is going on? How do you interpret the text? Where does your empathy lie?

❖ **Hebrew insight:** v.2 literally reads ... *perhaps I shall be built up through her.*³ This practice was a social norm in ancient cultures, as we see again later in the story of Jacob. The child would be considered to be Sarai's child, not her servant's. It is worth noting that Hagar would have been given to Sarai as a maidservant when they were in Egypt. As a servant, she was Sarai's 'property'.

Try also to switch focus from one level of meaning to another, remembering that this is a vital part of Abram's faith journey – another test he must grow and learn through. Remember that God brought Israel out of Egypt, but it took 40 years to get Egypt out of the people. Do we see a parallel here?

In Galatians 4:21-31 Paul explains Hagar and Sarah as an allegory representing two covenants – one according to the flesh, the other to the Spirit. Although the Sinai covenant has not yet come into play, we can see Hagar as representing the efforts of the flesh to bring forth spiritual fruit – it is not possible!

Q. Have you ever believed God for what seemed impossible, and seen Him work a miracle?

We might recall that, whilst God did promise Abram an heir through his own loins, he had not yet specified that this heir would come through his wife, Sarai—or could we say that Abram was not yet at a level of faith that could believe what seemed impossible?

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² Note similarities with God's presence on Mt Sinai.

³ *Banah* – first use Gen 2:22

After Hagar fled, the Lord found her by a spring of water on the way to Shur⁴ She was clearly on her way back to Egypt – returning to her idolatrous homeland. The fact that she is sitting by a spring of water indicates that she knew how to drink from the ‘spiritual well’ (i.e. the goodness of the LORD). She had been part of the household of Abraham and would have known about Abraham’s God. Here, she was not far removed from that, so, unlike the scene we see later in the story, she is able to perceive the spring of—her heart is not closed to God. But, she *was* on her way to Shur, that means she was on her way back to Egypt – and Egypt represents bondage.

Here the **Angel of the LORD**⁵ asks her a penetrating question: v.8 *“Hagar, servant of Sarah, where have you come from and where are you going?”* She said *“I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai.”* 9. *Whereupon the Angel of the LORD said to her, “Return to your mistress and submit to her.”*

The same Hebrew word, *anah*, translated here as “submit”, was used in verse 6, and is there translated: “harshly” - *anah* means to *afflict* or *humble*.

Q. What do you make of this request of the LORD? Why is it important to God that Hagar return?

This divine encounter did not stop there, for the Angel of the LORD also had a prophetic word for the son within her womb. Pay special attention to these words:

10. Then the Angel of the LORD said to her, “I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude. 11. And the angel of the LORD said to her, Behold, you are with child, and shall bear a son and you shall call his name Ish'mael, because the LORD has given heed to your affliction.

Three points in these verses demand our attention because of their resonance with other scriptures:

1. *“I will multiply your descendants ...”*, echoes the promises to Abraham regarding his descendants.
2. *“...you shall bear a son and you shall call his name ...”*, resonates with Isaiah 7:14 and Luke 1:31.
3. *“...because the Lord has given heed to your affliction.”* Recalls Exodus 2:23 when the Lord heard to the cry of the people of Israel in slavery in Egypt. God even embedded that in the very name of the child within Hagar’s womb – Ish’mael – meaning “God will hear”.

Keep these points in mind because they will become even more relevant as we go on.

There is also the remarkable repetition of “The Angel of the LORD said to her” in v. 9,10 & 11, as if to accentuate who is speaking and also to draw attention to each verse.

“He shall be a wild man; His hand shall be against every man, and every man’s hand against him. And he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.” Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees; for she said, “Have I also here seen Him who sees me?” Therefore the well was called Beer Lahai Roi... (literally: “the well of the One who lives and sees me”)

The Hebrew word translated “wild” here is *pereh*, and in every other case in Scripture, it is translated as “wild donkey” (or ass) Ishmael will not be tamed, will not be harnessed. Unfaithful, adulterous Israel is compared to a wild donkey on two occasions in Scripture using this very word – Hosea 8:9 & Jeremiah 2:24 – where it is used allegorically: “like a wild donkey alone by itself; Ephraim has hired lovers.”

We need to take in just what a uniquely significant and profound encounter this was for Hagar: The LORD Himself saw her distress; He heard the cry of her heart; she is the first person in the Bible to see God as He truly is: He is “the God Who Sees”, and He does not judge her, but He empowers her to return and submit to Sarah. This singles out Hagar as a very significant woman in God’s sight.

⁴ Shur is on the border of between Palestine and Egypt; the Israelites passed through the wilderness of Shur after crossing the Reed Sea. Shur means ‘wall’.

⁵ “The Angel of the LORD” is a specific angel denoting God Himself in the flesh, i.e. the pre-incarnate Christ.

CHAPTER 17 – Name Change and Sign of the Covenant

Abram was now 99 years old – twenty-four years have passed since he first received God’s promise in Genesis 12, and thirteen years have passed since Ishmael was born. *El Shaddai*, God Almighty *appears* to him – first let’s talk about the name of God revealed here:

El Shaddai literally means the “breasted God” – signifying that He pours forth nourishment, blessings from within Himself – El Shaddai is the true giver of His own life; He is the source from which Abram is to receive everything. Receiving this life-giving abundance also assumes that those who receive it will be ‘fruitful’ – God’s life will flow into them, and out from them.

Such is *El Shaddai*, “God Almighty”, who works His will in His elect by giving Himself to them, that they may give themselves to Him, and then by Him be blessed to others, in and by that circumcision or self-judgment, which makes them vessels, through which He can minister His own fullness.⁶

There are three important components in this encounter:

1. **Names were changed:** *Abram* - “exalted father”, becomes *Abraham* - “father of a multitude” Sarai - “my princess”, becomes Sarah - “princess” (in her own right) The letter ‘hey’⁷ is added to their names – ‘hey’ is the chief letter in God’s own name YHVH – it speaks of the out-breathing of His Spirit. The ‘hey’ is therefore a picture of the presence of God within the human heart.
2. **Circumcision** as a sign of an everlasting covenant between God and Abraham’s descendants: *Thus my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.*
3. **The promise that Sarah will bear a child** in her old age, and it is with him that God will establish His covenant.

Abram *fell on his face and laughed* when God said that ninety year old Sarah was to be a mother and him a father at 100. What kind of laughter would that have been? If joy, it was tinged with sadness: Take note of Abram’s poignant response in v.18: *“Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!”* He had loved and nurtured Ishmael for 13 years, believing him to be the promised son - no doubt also teaching him about the one true God. But God is not disregarding Ishmael, saying:

“Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.”

22. Then He finished talking with him, and God went up from Abraham.

The closeness of the relationship between God and Abraham is enhanced with each encounter. Here He “appeared to him” and “went up from him”; this encounter marks a vitally important milestone in Abraham’s faith journey.

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

It is important to understand that circumcision has always been meant as an outward sign of an inward condition – a sign in the flesh of an everlasting covenant relationship with God. As Christians, we understand circumcision as referring to ‘circumcision of the heart’, but this concept is not new to the NT. (see Deut. 10:16 and 30:6).

Paul explains the importance of circumcision ‘made without hands’ in Colossians 2:11-12:

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

⁶ Andrew Jukes, *The Names of God*, p81.

⁷ Hey is the 5th letter of the Hebrew alphabet – 5 signifies ‘grace’.

According to Torah Law, circumcision must be done on the eighth day –

“It has been shown that it is on the fifth through the seventh days of the newborn male’s life that vitamin K is present in adequate quantities for blood clotting. On the eighth day, the amount of prothrombin present is above one-hundred percent of normal (the only day in the male’s life in which this will be normally be the case). Therefore, the 8th day is the perfect day to do the circumcision ... when the Vitamin K and prothrombin levels are at their peak.”⁸⁸

Eight is also the number of ‘new beginning’. We can see how it points to a new beginning for those who are circumcised ‘without hands’—*that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’* (Jn. 3:6-7) The term ‘born again’ speaks of a ‘new beginning’ – the commencement of a spiritual relationship with God, and is the result of circumcision of the heart. Jesus evidently thought Nicodemus should have understood this, saying: “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?”

The Word of God is indeed filled with such deep wisdom and truth — continue to unpack amazing truths in the unfolding story of Abraham in the next study.

⁸⁸ <https://www.discovercreation.org/blog/2012/07/31/8th-day-circumcision/>