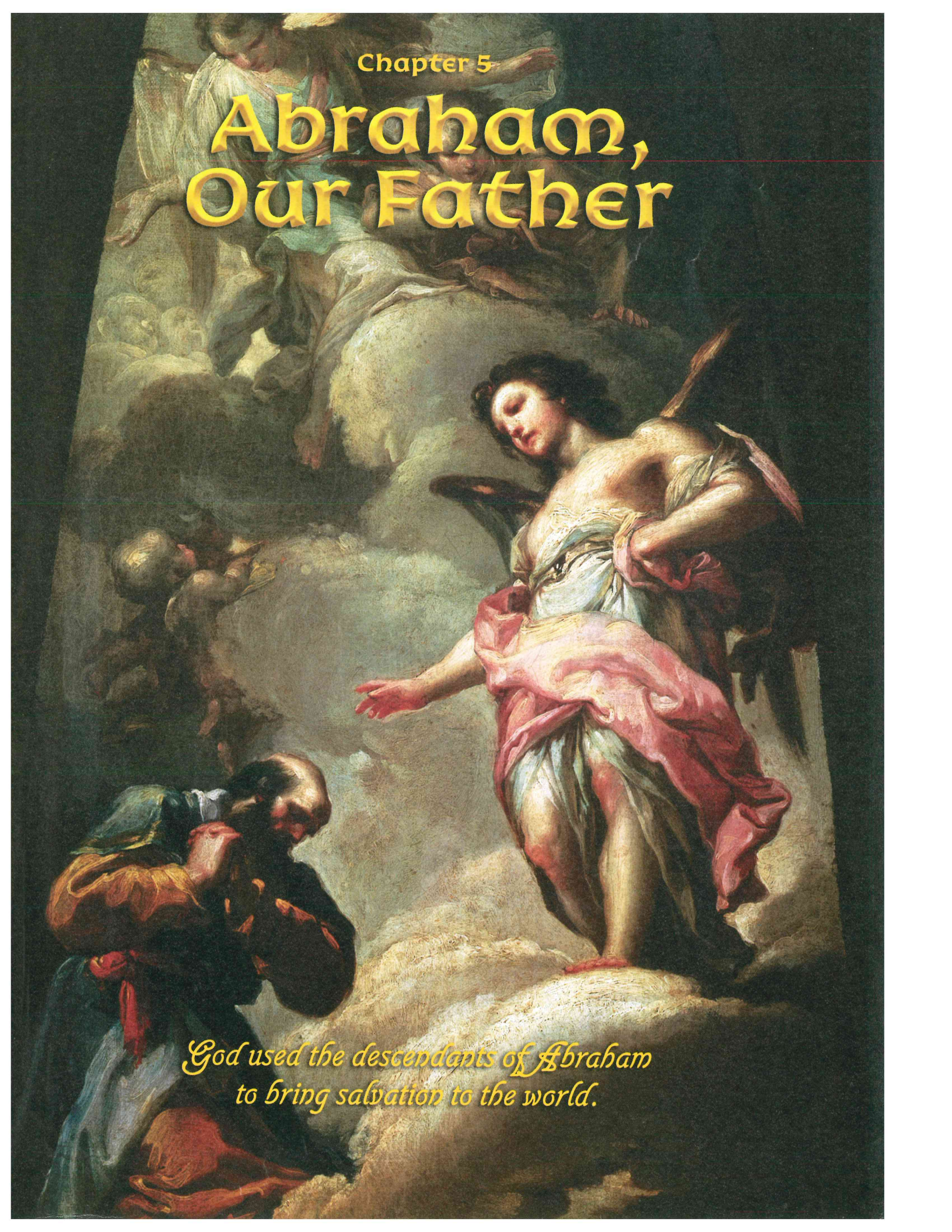


Chapter 5

Abraham, Our Father

*God used the descendants of Abraham
to bring salvation to the world.*



Chapter 5

Abraham, Our Father



Read

Genesis

11:31 - 12:9

13:2 - 18

14:17 - 20

15:1 - 19:38

21:1 - 14

22:1 - 19

The builders of the Tower of Babel tried to make a great *name*—in Hebrew, *shem*—for themselves without God’s help. But God had already chosen a descendant of Shem to become the new father of his people. Immediately after the story of the Tower of Babel, the book of Genesis gives us a detailed list of the descendants of Shem (Gn 11:10-27), ending up at Abram. “Abram” was his name then, but he is more familiar as “Abraham,” the father of a multitude of nations.

The Life Of A Nomad

- **Abram came from Ur, an important center of civilization in Mesopotamia.**
- **When he was a young man, Abram went with his father to Haran.**
- **In Haran, seventy-five-year-old Abram heard God calling him to go to Canaan.**

By the time Abram was born, his family was living in Ur, an ancient city in Mesopotamia. Ur was a great port city, with a towering ziggurat, thousands of houses and shops, and merchants from all over the world speaking every language.

Some of those merchants came by ship from places as far away as India. But Terah and his family—including his eldest son Abram—were probably caravan traders from the west. They were used to the idea of making long journeys over land, grazing their cattle along the way.

Terah had three sons: Abram, Nahor, and Haran. They all grew up and married. Haran died young, leaving behind a son named Lot. Terah seems to have raised his grandson Lot as his own son, and Lot and his uncle Abram developed a close relationship.

Then Terah decided to take his family away from Ur. Scripture tells us only that “they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan.” (Archaeology supplies one possible reason: if the traditional dating of Abram’s life is correct, Terah and his family might have left just when a new conqueror who hated western nomads like Terah and Abram took over in Ur.)

But when they came to the town of Haran, Terah settled there, abandoning his trip to Canaan. Haran was very much like Ur—a bustling market city where traders from all over the world came to sell their wares. It was a city where Terah could resume his familiar way of life.

So Terah and his family settled in Haran, and they prospered there. Terah died in Haran, and Abram grew old.

It was when he was already an old man that Abram's story really began. When Abram was seventy-five years old, he heard a call from God.

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to 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, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Gn 12: 1-3).

When God calls him, Abraham goes forth "as the LORD had told him" (Gn 12: 4); Abraham's heart is entirely submissive to the Word and so he obeys. Such attentiveness of the heart, whose decisions are made according to God's will, is essential to prayer, while the words used count only in relation to it. Abraham's prayer is expressed first by deeds: a man of silence, he constructs an altar to the Lord at each stage of his journey. Only later does Abraham's first prayer in words appear: a veiled complaint reminding God of his promises which seem unfulfilled (cf. Gn 15: 2f.). Thus one aspect of the drama of prayer appears from the beginning: the test of faith in the fidelity of God. (CCC 2570)



The Promises To Abram

- God promises Abram land, kingship, and worldwide blessing.
- Each of these promises will be fulfilled in another covenant later in history.
- God will reinforce each promise with a covenant oath.

There are three promises here at the beginning of Genesis 12.

1. **LAND AND A NATION.** “Go to the land that I will show you,” God says. As Abram will find out, the land God will show him is Canaan. Jewish legend had it that the land of Canaan was originally meant to belong to Shem, but Ham and Canaan had usurped Shem’s birthright. God will make a great nation of Abram, and the first thing a nation needs is land.
2. **KINGSHIP AND A NAME.** “I will bless you, and make your name great.” Making his *name* (in Hebrew, *Shem*) great meant founding a dynasty, giving Abram political authority and power. God has thrown down the proud tyrants of Babel, and now he intends to build a kingdom on humble, faithful Abram.
3. **BLESSING FOR ALL NATIONS.** “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”¹ God isn’t just promising to give Abram some local prestige among the tribes of Canaan. Impossible as it must sound to Abram, God will use Abram to bring salvation to the whole world. The whole human family, torn apart by sin, will be brought back together again through the line of Abraham.

As we’ll see in the chapters to come, these three promises are actually fulfilled in three more covenants later in history.

1. The promise of **LAND AND A NATION** will be fulfilled in the covenant with **Moses**.
2. The promise of **KINGSHIP AND A NAME** will be fulfilled in the covenant with **David**.
3. The promise of **BLESSING FOR ALL NATIONS** will be fulfilled through **Jesus Christ**.

The very first verse of the New Testament, Matthew 1:1, reminds us that the whole plan of salvation goes back to Abraham: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”

In order to gather together scattered humanity God calls Abram from his country, his kindred and his father’s house (Gn 12:1), and makes him Abraham, that is, “the father of a multitude of nations.” “In you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed” (Gn 17:5; 12:3 (LXX); cf. Gal 3:8). (CCC 59)

God would reinforce each of these promises individually with covenant oaths at three different points in Abraham’s life.

“When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, ... Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, ‘To your descendants I will give this land.’” (Gn 12: 5-7)



Abraham's Migration In The Near East, ca. 2120 B.C.



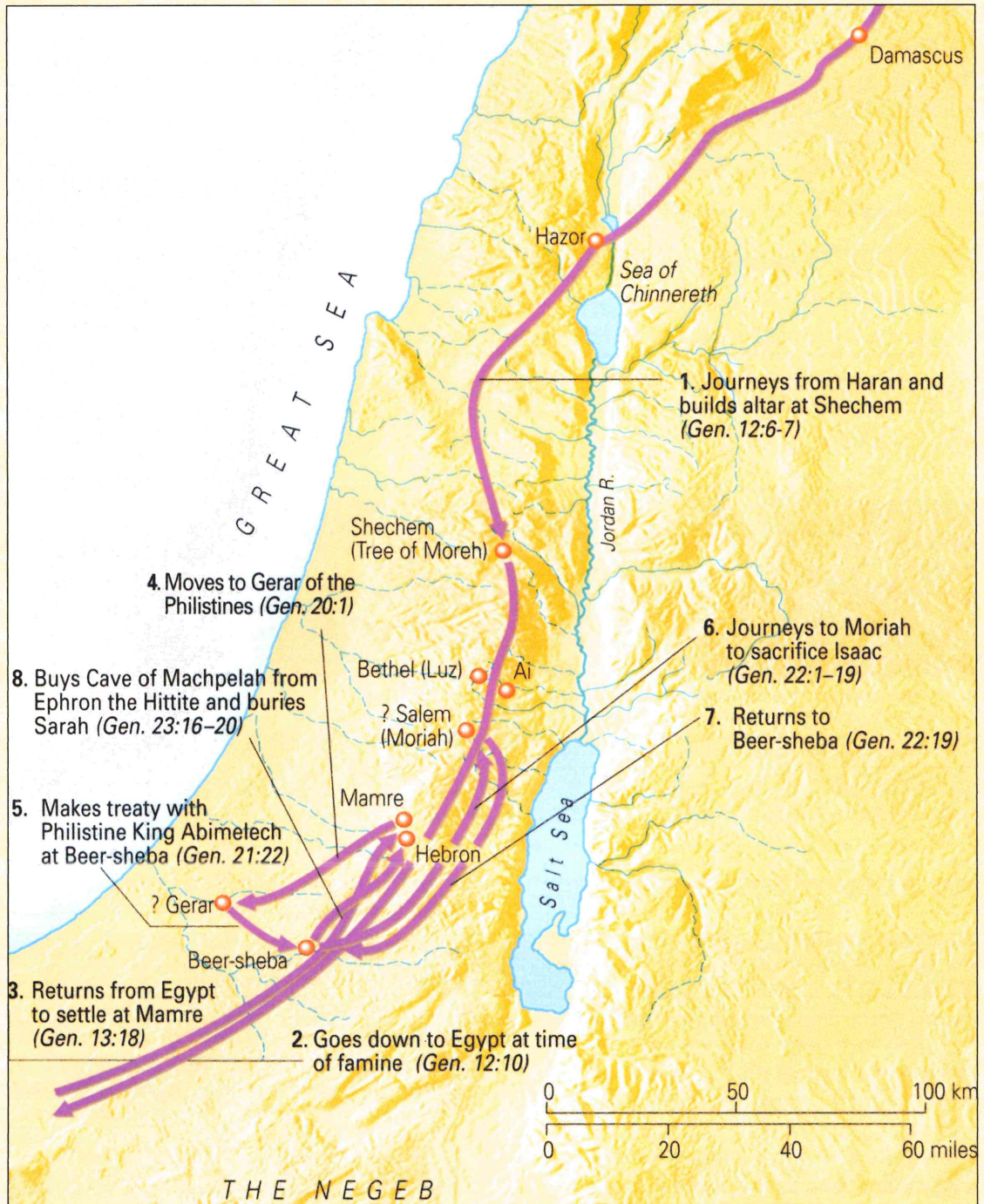
From Abram To Abraham

The book of Genesis explains Abram's name change as a change in meaning—"Exalted Father" (Abram) to "Father of a Multitude" (Abraham). Some linguists suggest that the name change had another significance as well. Abram, they say, was an East Semitic form of the name, a form that Abram would have used in Ur. Abraham was the West Semitic form of the same name. By taking the western form of the name, Abraham showed the world that he belonged permanently in Canaan, the land in the west that God had given him.



Abraham Journeying Into The Land of Canaan by Gustave Doré

The Journeys Of Abraham In Canaan, ca. 2100 B.C.



1. God's Oath: Land And A Nation

- **Abram believes God's unlikely promise of an heir.**
- **By a common ritual of the time, God swears a covenant oath to give Canaan to Abram's descendants.**

God's promise to Abram was hard to believe: Abram had no children, he was an old man already, and his wife, Sarai, had never been able to conceive. How could he have a dynasty with no descendants?

In Abram's time, having a multitude of descendants was considered the greatest possible blessing. Abram must have wondered why he seemed to be cursed. His journeys to Egypt and other places made him very wealthy,² but it was all meaningless if he had no son to carry on his name.

Once again, God came to Abram with a promise of great things. But this time Abram dared to ask how the promise could possibly be fulfilled.

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." But Abram said, "O LORD God, what wilt thou give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Behold, thou hast given me no offspring, and a slave born in my house will be my heir." (Gn 15:1-3)

Abram's questions were perfectly reasonable. But God was about to do something extraordinary, something beyond human reason.

And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; your own son shall be your heir." And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "so shall your descendants be." And he believed the LORD, and he reckoned it to him as righteousness. (Gn 15:4-6)

Even though it might have seemed very unlikely, Abram still believed God's promise. But he wanted more assurance about the land. "How am I to know that I shall possess it?" Abram asked.

Now comes a scene that seems very strange to modern readers. To understand it, we need to know how oaths were sworn in the ancient Near East.



In the time of Abram, and for many centuries afterwards, a serious oath was usually sealed with a sacrifice. We know from ancient inscriptions that the animals in a way represented the people who were swearing the oath. "If I break this oath," the people were saying, "may it be my blood spilled on the ground instead of this animal's." An especially solemn way to swear an oath was to cut the sacrifice in two and then walk between the two halves of the sacrifice.

So in answer to Abram's question, God told him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a she-goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a pigeon."³ Abram brought all the sacrificial animals, and he cut each of the

three large animals in half. All day long he guarded the sacrifices. When the sun began to go down, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and God appeared to him again, repeating the promise that Abram's descendants would possess Canaan—though only after being delivered from bondage in a foreign land. (The foreign land would be Egypt, as the book of Exodus will tell us.)

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites."

The firepot and torch represented the presence of God himself. By passing between the halves of the sacrifices, God was swearing a covenant oath with Abram, solemnly promising that the land would be his.



Lippi's *Circumcision* of Christ depicts the fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17: 9-14.

2. God's Oath: Kingship And A Name

- Sarai and Abram try to speed up God's plan by having Abram take another wife.
- God swears a covenant oath that kings will come from Abram's line.
- Abram's name is changed to Abraham.
- Circumcision is an outward sign of the covenant between God and Abraham.

But it was hard to believe that Sarai would ever have children. She was far too old. After they had lived ten years in Canaan, Sarai started to think that God might not have meant that Abram's heir should come through her.

One of the customs of the time (remember that the corrupt institution of polygamy had spread all over the world) was that a woman could give her servant to her husband, then claim the child as hers. Sarai had an Egyptian maid named Hagar. "Behold now," she said to Abram, "the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my maid; it may be that I shall obtain children by her."⁴

Abram did as Sarai suggested, and Hagar did conceive a son. He was named Ishmael, and for Abram's sake God made a great nation of him, too: he became the father of the Arabs. But God's plan would be accomplished through Abram and his real wife, Sarai. Ishmael was not the heir Abram had been promised. Yet by this time Abraham was eighty-six years old, and Sarai only about ten years younger. Ishmael must have seemed like his only chance.

Thirteen years later—when Abram was ninety-nine years old—God appeared to him again.

When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to him, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly." Then Abram fell flat on his face; and God said to him, "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall you be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. And I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God." (Gn 17:1-8)

Here God confirms the second part of the promise to Abram: kingship and a name. Kings will spring from his line, and he will be known as "Father of a Multitude"—Abraham instead of Abram. But there was more to this covenant than God's promise. Once again, there would be an external sign of the covenant.

And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised; every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house, or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he that is born in your house and he that is bought with your money, shall be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." (Gn 17:9-14)

Circumcision, a permanent marking of the flesh, would be the sign of the covenant between God and his people. The descendants of Abraham will bear the mark of the covenant forever.

Finally, God had a very surprising promise for Sarai.

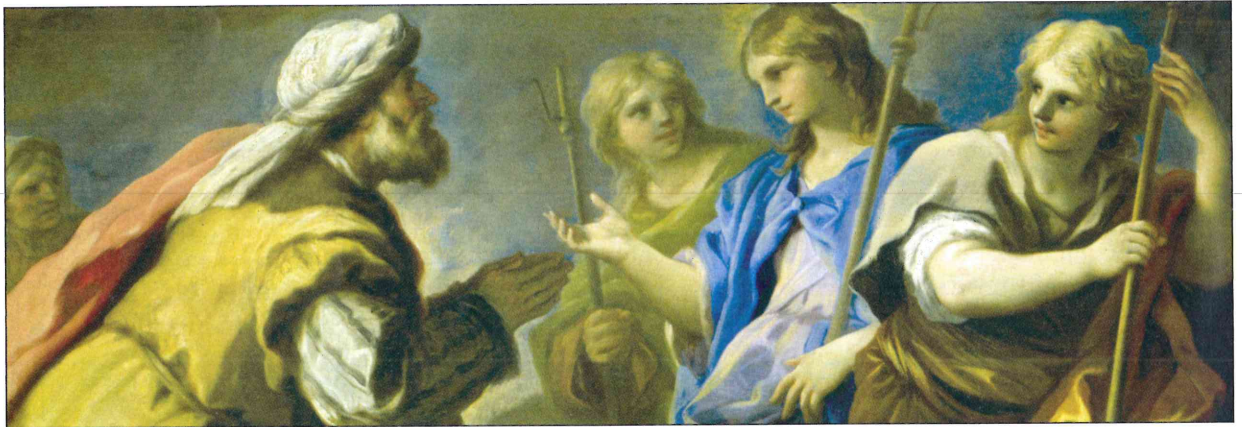
And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah [that is, "Princess" or "Queen"] shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her; I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall come from her." (Gn 17:15-16)

This was too much even for faithful Abraham to believe.

Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" And Abraham said to God, "O that Ishmael might live in thy sight!" God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac." (Gn 17:17-19)

The name Isaac means "he laughs" in Hebrew. Abraham laughed when he heard that he would have a child at his age. Later on, Sarah would laugh as well when she heard it.

But Abraham took his covenant with the Lord seriously. The very same day, Abraham had himself and all the males in his family circumcised—including Ishmael, who was thirteen years old. Circumcision at thirteen was the Egyptian custom; the Israelites who originally heard this story would see right away that Ishmael, the son of a slave-concubine, was not an Israelite, but an outsider—in other words, the promise God made to Abraham would not be fulfilled through Ishmael.



Some time afterward, the promise was repeated in a strange way. Abraham saw three strangers approaching his camp by the oaks of Mamre. Like any good hospitable Easterner, he ran out to meet them and begged them to stop for a while.⁵

They looked like ordinary travelers. But one of them was God himself, and the other two were his angels. "I will surely return to you in the spring," the Lord said, "and Sarah your wife shall have a son." Sarah, listening by the door of the tent, laughed to herself. She was far too old to have children. But the Lord, who heard her laughter, assured her that she really would have a son by spring.⁶

Against all human hope, God promises descendants to Abraham, as the fruit of faith and of the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. Gn 18:1-15; Lk 1:26-38, 54-55; Jn 1:12-13; Rom 4:16-21). In Abraham's progeny all the nations of the earth will be blessed. This progeny will be Christ himself (cf. Gn 12:3; Gal 3:16), in whom the outpouring of the Holy Spirit will "gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (cf. Jn 11:52). God commits himself by his own solemn oath to giving his beloved Son and "the promised Holy Spirit... [who is] the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it" (Eph 1:13-14; cf. Gn 22:17-19; Lk 1:73; Jn 3:16; Rom 8:32; Gal 3:14). (CCC 706)

Above: *Abraham and the Three Visitors*. The three visitors are considered by some to represent the Trinity.

Sodom And Gomorrah

- **Abraham bargains with God for the fate of Sodom.**
- **Sodom is so wicked that only Lot and his daughters are saved from the destruction.**
- **The children of Lot by his own daughters are the founders of two of Israel's worst enemies.**

Abraham was God's choice to found the People of God, so Abraham needed to know how the Lord dealt with unrighteousness. The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah had built up such a sinful reputation that God had decided something had to be done. God would make an inspection tour to see whether the rumors were true. (Of course, God knew the truth about Sodom and Gomorrah, but he was relating to Abraham in a human way that Abraham could understand.)

But Abraham's nephew Lot was living in Sodom. That gave Abraham a strong interest in the place. And so—in a moving scene that Abraham's descendants must have loved to tell around the campfire—Abraham pleaded with God as would a child with his father. “Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city,” he began, and God assured him that the place wouldn't be destroyed if there were fifty righteous.

Then Abraham thought for a moment. “Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Wilt thou destroy the whole city for lack of five?” God assured him that the place wouldn't be destroyed if there were forty-five righteous.

“Suppose forty are found there,” Abraham continued, and so on. He finally talked God down to ten. If there were ten righteous people there, God wouldn't destroy the city.⁷

Abraham might have thought he had saved Sodom. After all, Lot and his family were there, and there were at least six of them, counting future sons-in-law. But what the two angels found when they reached Sodom was every bit as bad as the rumors said it would be.

Lot himself had kept some of the family's virtue. He showed the same hospitality to the strangers that Abraham had shown them, taking them in and offering them a night's rest under his roof. But the people of Sodom surrounded the house and demanded that Lot turn over his guests. They made their intentions perfectly clear: to rape the strangers.⁸

Homosexuality refers to relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex. It has taken a great variety of forms through the centuries and in different cultures. Its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained. Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity (cf. Gn 19: 1-29; Rom 1: 24-27; 1 Cor 6: 10; 1 Tm 1: 10), tradition has always declared that “homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered” (CDF, *Persona humana* 8). They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved. (CCC 2357)

The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God's will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition. (CCC 2358)

Homosexual persons are called to chastity. By the virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship, by prayer and

sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection. (CCC 2359)

Lot hardly knew what to do. In that time, people thought there was almost no worse sin than a sin against hospitality. A homosexual rape is a grave enough sin, but Lot had invited the strangers in; that meant they were under his protection. He would be responsible if something bad happened to them. He tried to reason with the mob. He even offered his own daughters if the mob would leave the strangers alone. That was not the right thing to do, but Lot was desperate, and the mob was threatening serious violence. In fact, it took a miraculous intervention by the angels to evade the mob: they struck everyone blind and pulled Lot back into the house, shutting the door behind him.

No more investigation was needed after that demonstration. The angels warned Lot that they would destroy the city, and he would have to get his family out quickly. Lot gave the news to his sons-in-law, but they did not take him seriously. And when the time came to flee, even Lot lingered longer than he ought to have. The angels had to drag him out of the city, along with his wife and daughters. "Flee for your life," they told him; "do not look back or stop anywhere in the valley; flee to the hills, lest you be consumed."⁹ God showed his mercy by allowing the innocent to escape.



"Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven;... But Lot's wife behind him looked back and she became a pillar of salt." (Gn 19: 24, 26)

The angels meant their instructions to be taken seriously. Lot and his daughters just barely escaped the destruction. Lot's wife stopped for a moment to look back, and turned into a pillar of salt.¹⁰

Everything Lot had was destroyed, and everything that he had considered civilization was gone. The blooming plain with its prosperous cities was a sunken, barren wasteland with a poisonous lake in the middle—the lake we call the Dead Sea. He cowered with his daughters in a mountain cave, afraid to go back to the lowlands after the horrendous catastrophe.



To Lot's two daughters, lost in a cave far from anyone else, it seemed like their father was the last man on earth. "Our father is old," they said, "and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of all the earth."¹¹

So they came up with a wicked scheme. They got their father drunk and tricked him into fathering their children. The results of these two incestuous unions were sons who would be the fathers of two more nations, the Moabites and the Ammonites—hated enemies who would try to destroy Israel at every opportunity.

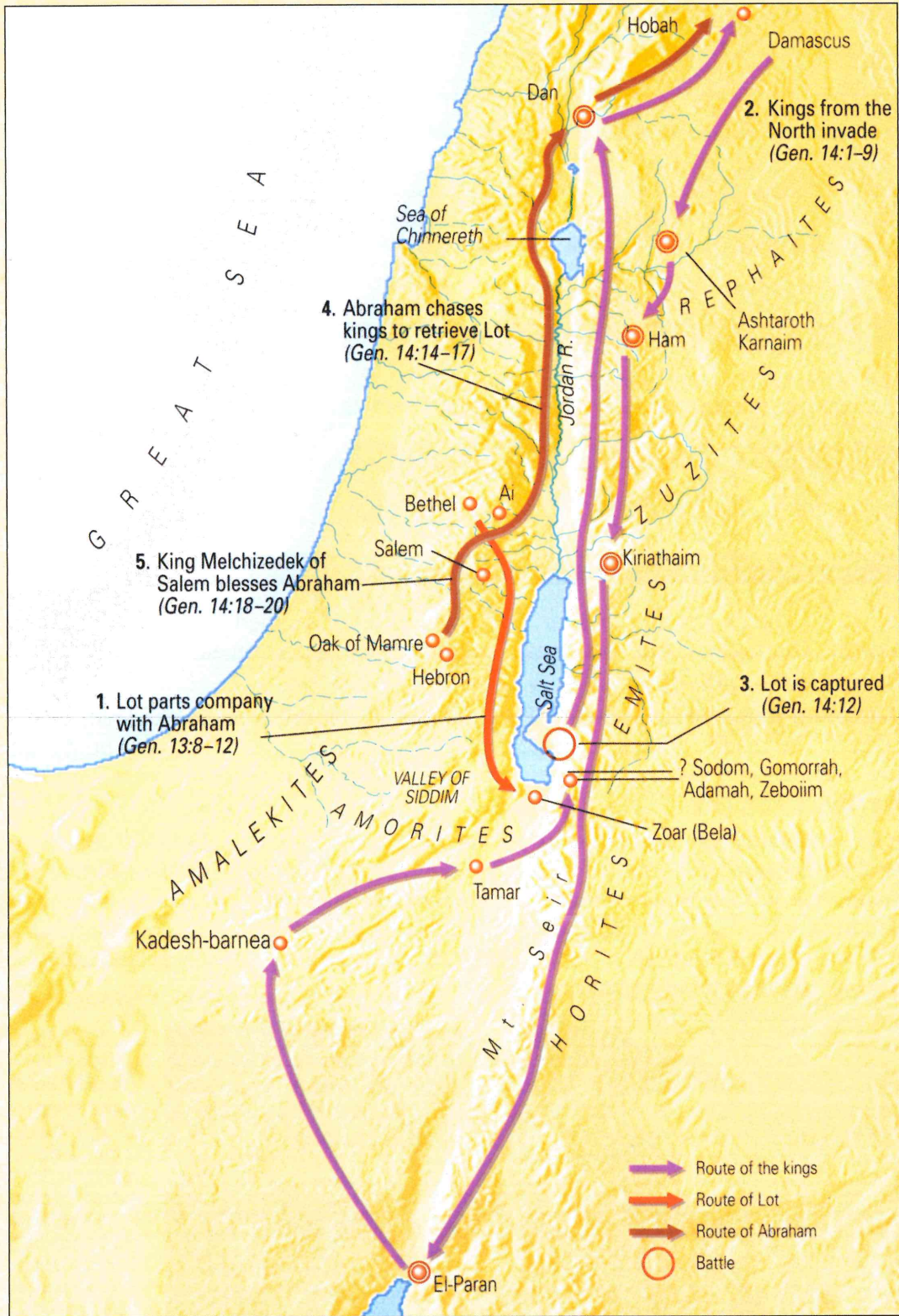
Incest designates intimate relations between relatives or in-laws within a degree that prohibits marriage between them (cf. Lv 18:7-20). St. Paul stigmatizes this especially grave offense: "It is actually reported that there is immorality among you... for a man is living with his father's wife... In the name of the Lord Jesus... you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh..." (1 Cor 5:1, 4-5). Incest corrupts family relationships and marks a regression toward animality. (CCC 2388)



The Sea of Sodom

With a salinity of 26-35%, the Dead Sea is truly dead. Ten times as salty as the world's oceans, its shoreline is the lowest point of dry land on earth at 1300 feet below sea level. 7 million tons of water evaporate daily.

The Story Of Lot



3. The Binding Of Isaac And God's Third Oath

- **Abraham gains a son in Isaac but loses Ishmael to Sarah's jealousy.**
- **When God tells him to sacrifice his only remaining son, Abraham obeys.**
- **The sacrifice of Isaac is a type of the sacrifice of Christ.**

When spring came, Sarah gave birth to a son and named him Isaac, just as the Lord had promised. It certainly was a joyous occasion—but it ended up splitting Abraham's family apart.

Sarah saw Ishmael mocking her son Isaac. "So she said to Abraham, 'Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac.'"¹² Perhaps she had forgotten that Abraham's double marriage was her idea in the first place. Throughout Genesis, whenever someone breaks the marriage covenant by taking more than one wife, the result is always jealousy and pain.

"And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son," the book tells us. Abraham loved his son Ishmael. But God told him that Ishmael would also become a great nation. However, it was Isaac that would carry on the divine covenant.¹³

Ishmael and his mother were thrown out into the wilderness, where Ishmael grew up and married an Egyptian woman, and we hear nothing more of him for a while. Now Abraham had only one son left. As he watched the boy grow into a young man, all his hopes depended on Isaac.



After these things God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." (Gn 22: 1-2)

Here is where we see the real depth of Abraham's faith. He would certainly rather have offered himself as a sacrifice than his only remaining son. And we know that he was willing to bargain with God over the destruction of Sodom. But here he simply responds.

So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; and he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place afar off. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the ass; I and the young man will go yonder and worship, and come again to you." And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here am I, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together. (Gn 22: 3-8)

Above right: Abraham Casts Out Hagar and Ishmael.

Notice that Isaac carries the wood for his own sacrifice. He is not a little boy; but rather a strong man. And Abraham has left his servants behind: he is alone with Isaac, an ancient man about to sacrifice his strong young son. If Isaac wanted to fight back, he certainly could.

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him upon the altar, upon the wood. Then Abraham put forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. (Gn 22: 9-10)

By the time his father was tying him up, Isaac knew what was happening. Remember that Abraham was already an old man. How was he able to tie up a strong young man and lay him on the altar? There can be only one explanation: Isaac himself cooperated. The sacrifice was not only Abraham's; Isaac himself was a willing participant. The Jewish writing known as 4 Maccabees shows us that ancient Jewish readers saw the story that way: "Remember whence you came, and the father by whose hand Isaac would have submitted to being slain for the sake of religion."¹⁴

As for Abraham, he could only have faith. If God chose, he could raise Isaac from the dead (see Heb 11: 19). Meanwhile, Abraham could only resign himself to the will of God.



But the story has a happy ending.

But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place The LORD will provide; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided." (Gn 22: 11-14)

The people who surrounded the ancient Israelites practiced human sacrifice all the time. In particular, they sacrificed their own children to their horrible idols. But the people of Israel would remember this story and know that their God never demanded human sacrifice, that the Lord's own angel had stayed Abraham's hand when he was about to kill his son.

For Christians, the story has far more significance. The Church Fathers saw the sacrifice of Isaac as a type of the sacrifice of Christ.

Isaac	Christ
A father offers his beloved son.	The Father offers his beloved Son.
The son submits to the father's will.	The Son submits to the Father's will.
Isaac carries the wood for his own sacrifice.	Jesus carries his own wooden cross.
God himself provides the sacrifice.	God himself provides the perfect sacrifice.

The mountains of Moriah were the hills around Jerusalem. On one of the peaks, the Temple would later be built, where the whole nation of Israel would offer its sacrifices to God. On another one, Golgotha, Jesus would offer himself as the last sacrifice.

Because of Abraham's faith, God swears an oath to deliver the last and most incredible part of his promise: that all the nations of the world will be blessed through Abraham.

And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply you as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice." (Gn 22:15-17)

At last, it seemed, the promised blessings had arrived. Abraham lived to a good old age, and by the end of his life he had seen his son married and well established. It must have seemed as though the hard times were over, and his descendants would have only to enjoy the blessings God had promised.

But the hard times were not over. Abraham's descendants would sin and fail over and over again. Still, God had not forgotten his covenant. In spite of their sins and failings, God was using the descendants of Abraham to bring salvation to the world.



The Dome of the Rock mosque in Jerusalem is built upon the Temple Mount which is thought to be the site where Abraham took Isaac to be sacrificed. Salem is believed to be Jerusalem and Mount Moriah the hill on which the Temple stood.



The Cave of Machpelah in Hebron was purchased by Abraham as a burial place for his wife Sarah. He paid 400 shekels of silver to Ephron the Hittite. (Gn 23) Later, Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Leah were buried here. Jewish people are allowed to visit only 10 days a year.

SUPPLEMENTARY READING

Augustine, *City of God*, XV: 25:

The anger of God is not a disturbing emotion of his mind, but a judgment by which punishment is inflicted upon sin. His thought and reconsideration also are the unchangeable reason which changes things; for he does not, like man, repent of anything he has done, because in all matters his decision is as inflexible as his prescience is certain. But if Scripture were not to use such expressions as the above, it would not familiarly insinuate itself into the minds of all classes of men, whom it seeks access to for their good, that it may alarm the proud, arouse the careless, exercise the inquisitive, and satisfy the intelligent; and this it could not do, did it not first stoop, and in a manner descend, to them where they lie. But its denouncing death on all the animals of earth and air is a declaration of the vastness of the disaster that was approaching: not that it threatens destruction to the irrational animals as if they too had incurred it by sin.

Commentary, *Genesis 12: 1-6*

God's call to Abraham (the name he would give him instead of Abram: cf. 17:5) marks the start of a new stage in his dealings with mankind, because his covenant with Abraham will prove a blessing to all nations. It means that Abraham has to break earthly ties, ties with family and place, and put his trust entirely in God's promise—an unknown country, many descendants (even though his wife is barren: cf. 11:30) and God's constant protection. This divine calling also involves a break with the idolatrous cult followed by Abraham's family in the city of Haran (apparently a moon cult) so as to worship the true God.

Abraham responds to God's call; believing and trusting totally in the divine word, he leaves his country and heads for Canaan. Abraham's attitude is in sharp contrast with the human pride described earlier in connection with the tower of Babel (cf. 11:19), and even more so with the disobedience of Adam and Eve which was the cause of mankind's break with God.

The divine plan of salvation begins to operate by requiring man to make an act of obedience: in Abraham's case, he is asked to set out on a journey. The plan will reach its goal with the perfect obedience shown by Jesus "made obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8), whereby all mankind will obtain the mercy of God (cf. Rom 5:19). Everyone who listens and obeys the voice of the Lord, all believers, can therefore be regarded as children of Abraham. "Thus Abraham 'believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.'" So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham.



God Testing Abraham—This parchment folio is from the Velislav Bible, ca. 1341, one of the most comprehensive medieval illustrated Bibles. The Bible is narrated by 800 paintings with Latin captions. The original manuscript is in the National Library of the Czech Republic.

VOCABULARY

ABRAHAM

A descendant of Shem; founder of the Hebrew nation.

ABRAM

The original name of Abraham.

ANGEL

A messenger from God. Angels are pure spirit. In Scripture, their appearances are usually terrifying.

CIRCUMCISION

The visible sign of God's covenant with Abraham. Circumcision set the People of God apart from other nations.

ISAAC

Son of Abraham and Sarah; born when they were very old. Although Isaac was not Abraham's first son, he was the only child born of Sarah, Abraham's wife, making Isaac the heir of God's promises.

ISHMAEL

Abraham's son by Hagar, Sarah's servant. The founder of the Arab tribes.

GOMORRAH

See Sodom.

LOT

Abraham's nephew. He settled in the prosperous plains, leaving Abraham in the wilderness of the hill country.

MORIAH

The mountains around Jerusalem, where Abraham went to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice.

SARAH

The wife of Abraham and mother of Isaac.

SARAI

The original name of Sarah.

SODOM

Along with Gomorrah, one of the cities of the plain destroyed by God because of wickedness. Lot had settled there, but was warned by angels to flee.

UR

A city in the Plain of Shinar, the original home of Abraham.



A
"Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God." (Gn 21: 33)

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In what city did Abram grow up?
2. Who were Abram's brothers?
3. How old was Abram when he first heard God's call?
4. What lesson can we learn from Abraham's submissiveness to God?
5. What were the three promises God made to Abram?
6. Through which three of Abraham's descendants are these promises fulfilled?
7. What does Matthew 1:1 remind us?
8. Why did a firepot and a torch pass between Abram's sacrifices after he had questioned God about his promises?
9. What was the sign of God's covenant with Abram?
10. What were God's promises to Abraham?
11. What was to be the sign of the covenant between God and his people?
12. How old was Sarah when she was told she would have a son?
13. What was the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah?
14. How should those who have homosexual tendencies be treated?
15. Who was Lot and why did he have to leave his city?
16. How are God's actions at Sodom and Gomorrah signs of his judgment and mercy?
17. Why were Ishmael and his mother thrown out into the wilderness?
18. In what ways was the proposed sacrifice of Isaac a "type" of the Lord's sacrifice on the cross?
19. What city was built on the mountains of Moriah?



"Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God..." (Gn 22: 12)

PRACTICAL EXERCISES

1. A recurring theme in the story of Abraham is his humble obedience to God. Two great examples of this obedience are Abraham's answer to God's call and his willingness to offer his only son as a sacrifice when God asked. What are some ways in which we can show humble obedience to God? How could this obedience help us in our prayer? How could it help us in our relations with our parents or family and friends?
2. As part of his humble obedience, Abraham had a great trust in God. Though he and Sarah were very old and had no children, he still believed God when he was told his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. Abraham's vocation was to be the father

of a multitude of nations. Think about what God may be calling you to do. What are some ways you can prepare yourself to accept what God wants you to do? Who could you go to for help in discerning your vocation?

3. At World Youth Day in 2003, the following quote was part of a speech given to all the young people that were present: "Homosexuality is not a 'variant' of human sexuality that can be put on an equal footing with heterosexuality. It is the expression of unresolved conflictive tension in a tendency that is separate from sexual identity." What does this mean? How can this quote be related to the CCC excerpts in this chapter that concern homosexuality?



King Melchizedek of Salem
Blesses Abraham

*"And he blessed him
and said, 'Blessed be
Abram by God Most High,
maker of heaven and earth;
and blessed be God Most
High, who has delivered your
enemies into your hand!'"
(Gn 14:19-20)*

FROM THE CATECHISM

60 The people descended from Abraham would be the trustee of the promise made to the patriarchs, the chosen people, called to prepare for that day when God would gather all his children into the unity of the Church (cf. Rom 11: 28; Jn 11: 52; 10: 16). They would be the root on to which the Gentiles would be grafted, once they came to believe (cf. Rom 11: 17-18, 24).

72 God chose Abraham and made a covenant with him and his descendants. By the covenant God formed his people and revealed his law to them through Moses. Through the prophets, he prepared them to accept the salvation destined for all humanity.

145 The Letter to the Hebrews, in its great eulogy of the faith of Israel's ancestors, lays special emphasis on Abraham's faith: "By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go" (Heb 11: 8; cf. Gn 12: 1-4). By faith, he lived as a stranger and pilgrim in the promised land (cf. Gn 23: 4). By faith, Sarah was given to conceive the son of the promise. And by faith Abraham offered his only son in sacrifice (cf. Heb 11: 17).

150 Faith is first of all a personal adherence of man to God. At the same time, and inseparably, it is a *free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed*. As personal adherence to God and assent to his truth, Christian faith differs from our faith in any human person. It is right and just to entrust oneself wholly to God and to believe

absolutely what he says. It would be futile and false to place such faith in a creature (cf. Jer 17: 5-6; Ps 40: 5; 146: 3-4).

1080 From the very beginning God blessed all living beings, especially man and woman. The covenant with Noah and with all living things renewed this blessing of fruitfulness despite man's sin which had brought a curse on the ground. But with Abraham, the divine blessing entered into human history which was moving toward death, to redirect it toward life, toward its source. By the faith of "the father of all believers," who embraced the blessing, the history of salvation is inaugurated.

1819 Christian hope takes up and fulfills the hope of the chosen people which has its origin and model in the *hope of Abraham*, who was blessed abundantly by the promises of God fulfilled in Isaac, and who was purified by the test of the sacrifice (cf. Gn 17: 4-8; 22: 1-18). "Hoping against hope, he believed, and thus became the father of many nations" (Rom 4: 18).

2571 Because Abraham believed in God and walked in his presence and in covenant with him (cf. Gn 15: 6; 17: 1 f.), the patriarch is ready to welcome a mysterious Guest into his tent. Abraham's remarkable hospitality at Mamre foreshadows the annunciation of the true Son of the promise (cf. Gn 18: 1-15; Lk 1: 26-38). After that, once God had confided his plan, Abraham's heart is attuned to his Lord's compassion for men and he dares to intercede for them with bold confidence (cf. Gn 18: 16-33).

Endnotes

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| 1. We use the alternate reading of the Revised Standard Version, given in a footnote. Compare Sir 44: 21. | 3. Gn 15: 9. | 9. Gn 19: 17. |
| 2. Gn 13: 1. | 4. Gn 16: 2. | 10. Gn 19: 26. |
| | 5. Gn 18: 1-8. | 11. Gn 19: 31. |
| | 6. Gn 18: 9-15. | 12. Gn 21: 10. |
| | 7. Gn 18: 16-33. | 13. Gn 21: 11-13. |
| | 8. Gn 19: 5. | 14. 4 Mc 13: 12. |