

The Sign of the Covenant

17 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty;^[a] walk before me, and be blameless. ²And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." ³Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴"As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵No longer shall your name be Abram,^[b] but your name shall be Abraham;^[c] for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring^[d] after you. ⁸And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God."

Judgment Pronounced on Sodom

¹⁶Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way. ¹⁷The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, ¹⁸seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?^[a] ¹⁹No, for I have chosen^[b] him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." ²⁰Then the LORD said, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! ²¹I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know."

²²So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD.^[c] ²³Then Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? ²⁵Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" ²⁶And the LORD said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." ²⁷Abraham answered, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. ²⁸Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." ²⁹Again he spoke to him, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." ³⁰Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there." ³¹He said, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." ³²Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." ³³And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

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Genealogy of Genesis: Father Abraham

Genesis 17:1-8; 18:16-33

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A recent Washington Post headline captured my attention as I have been looking at and fascinated by the family history stemming from our forefather Abraham. The headline read, “With 800 Offspring, Very Sexually Active Tortoise Saves Species from Extinction.” This old turtle, Diego, was brought to the United States from the Galapagos islands by a scientific expedition sometime between 1900 and 1959 and eventually he ended up in the San Diego zoo. In 1976, he was brought back to a captive breeding facility in the Galapagos and since then, he has brought his species from the brink of extinction – pretty much by himself.

How my mind works, that story reminded me of the promises God makes to Father Abraham. Ninety- nine years old and he is promised a son, but not just any son, he was promised that he would be the ancestor of many nations, exceedingly fruitful, with offspring that would outnumber the stars. Like good old Diego, he was going to be the one known for populating his whole world. Understandably, there was a bit of disbelief on the part of his ninety-nine-year-old wife. So, Sarah “gives” her handmaid to Abraham to produce the heir God promises. We all know what this means, right? Hagar didn’t really have a say in the matter. She was Sarah’s property, not a person with rights of her own. And yet, she bears for Abraham a son Ishmael, whose descendants become the Ishmaelites, and later Muslim history would trace the prophet Muhammad’s ancestry back to Abraham through this lineage. Then Sarah amazingly becomes pregnant in her old age and has a son, Issac, who fathers Jacob and Esau. Jacob will later take the name Israel, and his sons and grandsons via Joseph are the beginning of the 12 tribes that make

up the whole covenant community plus the Levites who populate the Hebrew priesthood. Esau's descendants are the Edomites. And from his wife Keturah, whom he marries after Sarah's death, he fathers another 6 offspring, and not to leave anyone out, the rest of his nameless children fathered with his concubines get a brief mention in Genesis 25, verse 6. Then he dies probably feeling rather accomplished at 175 years old, leaving "all he had" to his favorite son Issac, which maybe wasn't much at that point. That's the root of this amazing family tree, and so you can follow along through the next few weeks, there's a bulletin insert with biblical references in case you want to look for yourself as to how this wild and crazy family puts out its branches.

Diego's amazing procreative biology aside, this seems a rather tall tale by human standards. Maybe it is, maybe it's the complete truth exactly as it's reported. I can't tell you for sure. What I do know is that folks who study genealogy will tell you that histories tend to exaggerate the good parts and even legal documents get "adjusted" (shall we say) to make improvements on the story.

So, have any of you been drawn in by the ads on ancestry.com? My mother and father, who live in the kind of small town where you have to know who your "people" are, and it's even better if you know who else is related to whom as well, went so far as to swab their cheek cells for DNA and send off for the biological results. Sounds intriguing, doesn't it? To find out at the cellular level exactly who your ancestors truly are.

Well, I have to tell a story on my dad at this point. He was hugely disappointed when the results came back and his DNA results showed that he is a white male of European descent. Now given that my dad is a white guy, of rather obvious European descent, I wasn't surprised that's what his report said. He was peeved and wanted his money back. He had romanticized the notion that he would learn about a town, or a region, or at least a country where his people had started.

He hoped they would tell him about which Native American tribe or at least nation had mingled with his European ancestors somewhere back down the line. We yearn to have such a traceable identity. The melting pot of American intermingling of colonists, Native Americans, African slaves, and waves of immigrants means that we find those sorts of questions of identity sometimes difficult to answer.

Who are we? And who is the God of our ancestors? Those are trickier questions for us this far removed, but they were the primary questions being answered by this notably detailed genealogical narrative in the book of Genesis. Knowing who their people were helped them understand who their God was too. The God of Adam and Eve, the God of Noah was far more scary and unpredictable. That God operated with threats, “Don’t eat from that tree, because if you do, you will die,” and God punished through genocide, “Build an ark for your family because I’m wiping out everyone else in a flood.” Those ancient creation narratives speak boldly of the precariousness of life enlightened by the truth of as far back as our ancestral memory can take us. The threat changes to a promise when God speaks his word to Father Abraham. It is a game changer. God finds favor with Abraham and promises him that for his obedience, God will restrain divine wrath and allow his progeny to become numerous, almost beyond measure.

The real change that transpires is that it’s a two-sided covenant. God promises two gifts – abundant life and land in perpetuity. And Abraham promises to keep his side of the deal – obedience, faithfulness, and upright living as God sees it. Essentially, they shake on it, and the promise is designed to be everlasting. Now that promise won’t even make it out of the book of Genesis before both parties get a little twitchy. Abraham and Sarah try to manipulate the promise from the very beginning. Sarah knows enough about her age to realize that it is highly unlikely that she could get pregnant, let alone carry a pregnancy to term, thus their “use” of Hagar.

Also, at this time, concepts of justice are just being formed, or at least more routinely articulated. In his book “The Genesis of Justice,” law professor Alan Dershowitz asks an interesting question that was also part of his rabbinic learning. If the Torah is a book about law, not history – which his teacher says it was, why start with creation rather than with the first laws? The Creation stories are messy, tribal, and other than the ordering of the world, don’t always put God in a very good light. But maybe we need to know more about the messiness of human life before we can get to how to bring order from the chaos. Dershowitz says it this plainly, “It is precisely because the Torah is a law book that it *should* include stories that illustrate the need for laws and rules.” (Dershowitz, p. 218)

And the covenant between God and Abraham is a kind of arrangement for honoring justice, for creating structure and meaning, isn’t it? As it is repeated often in the prophetic texts of scripture as well, God will be their God, and they will be God’s people, and it all starts with Abraham. Now Abraham will certainly be tested by God as he is asked to sacrifice his son Issac who was part of the promise in the first place. I’m going to wait until next week’s chapter on Issac to try to handle that one, but in the second reading we had this morning, Abraham is making sure that God will stick to his promises as well.

This is a story about chutzpah – that kind of courage in the moment that can also look like complete foolishness. God is mad at Sodom and Gomorrah, for he has heard the people cry out because of the wickedness there. And because Abraham is his chosen one for blessing, for being the one to demonstrate justice and righteousness, he doesn’t want to hide his plans from him, but tells him that the cities are going to be completely destroyed, wiped out, and burned to the ground. But Abraham has heard about this before. God has punished like this before. Maybe

God is trying to find the loophole here. *Now I said I wouldn't wipe the world out with a flood again, promise, but what about some fire?*

Abraham argues back, engaging God's covenant promise as a legal argument. But what if? What if, God, there are 50 righteous in the city? Will you still destroy it? Then God says, no. He can't do such a sweeping punishment if 50 innocent people will get hurt. Abraham wants to know if God's righteousness is such that slaying the innocent with the wicked is OK. Because it's not OK. We know that it happens; it happens frequently, but we want to know that's not in God's character to bring about death and destruction so blanketly. Abraham has established with this line of questioning that it's a bad idea to simply wipe out a whole city because there are those who are giving it that reputation for wickedness, because some innocent people will get hurt in the process. Once that is established, then he argues the matter of degree – well, then what about 20 righteous people? How about 10?

Throughout scripture, Old Testament and New, we recall that we too are children of Abraham, heirs to a promise, a promise that Jesus understood as well. God will be our God and we will be God's people. And I've learned from Abraham, not only are we responsible for our side of the bargain, walking uprightly as we can, but we are expected to hold God to God's promises as well. We can expect, demand, and argue for God to uphold the blessings for abundant life and fruitful land. This promise may seem shaky now, or perhaps stretched to its limits. The expansive population of the earth and the environmental dangers to the land are verging on that line of being bad news rather than good. How are we connected to the God of Abraham now? Has God changed? Has humankind changed? Have our circumstances changed such that the covenant needs to be rewritten?

In this part of the genealogy, God chooses a man to be blessed to be a blessing to the world. And we discover in our reading that that person is not perfect, not as blameless as we might want him to be, perhaps a little bit brazen, and yet was a good choice for getting a civilization started single-handedly, even starting in his hundredth year. The promise, the covenant, was released into the world – and many still recall that incident as the start of formalizing our relationship with God, if not as the divine promise that holds them to God as God's chosen people.

So, who is the God of Abraham? Well, the God of Abraham seems to still have much to learn. I find that incredible that the Bible is so open in that way, to allow God to be challenged and for the human challenger to be heard. God listens to Abraham's argument – much more so than when Job tries to talk back. God will still be alternately blamed and forgiven throughout the centuries for the difficulties of our world, but God will be held to God's promises, and God will be responsible for divine justice and righteousness. These are not easy themes to tackle in religion, and yet, they are ours to wrestle with from the dawn of our ancestors. Amen.