

# Call, Covenant, and Community: The Story of Abraham and Sarah'

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Abraham and Sarah are the father and mother of us all. That fact alone might justify our interest in them, but we are also intrigued by their blind venture into an unknown land, their miraculous conception of a child at a ripe old age, and the heroic character of their faith and life. They were also fallible and, as we say today, vulnerable. Abraham, "the knight of faith" (Kierkegaard), passed his wife off into Pharaoh's harem in order to save his own neck and did not flinch at the favorable change in economic fortunes that resulted; Sarah laughed in disbelief when God got serious about giving them a son, Isaac, whose name itself means laughter; and both Abraham and Sarah appear opportunistic and mean-spirited in the two incidents with Hagar (Genesis 16 and 21). Yet, these fallible and vulnerable people could also be called "perfect," they circumcised the members of their

household on the very day the divine order was first given, and Abraham's daring courage at the near sacrifice of Isaac has inspired artists, poets, theologians, and musicians for nearly 4,000 years.

Their adventures began, according to the quaint biblical chronology, when they were already 75 and 65 years old. Sarai and

'An earlier version of this essay was delivered at the Third Interfaith Conference on Biblical Studies, on May 5, 1987, in Portland, Oregon. I publish it in honor of John H. Tietjen, whose leadership in Jewish-Christian dialogue was recognized in 1983, when the St. Louis Chapter of the American Jewish Committee presented him with their annual Micah award.

The "great nation" is probably only a reworking of the old promise of many descendants. According to this promissory tradition the descendants would be as numerous as the dust (Gen 13:16) or the stars (Gen 15:5; 22:17; 26:4).

Abram were sent to the land of Canaan with the promise that God would make them a great nation,' with an outstanding reputation (Gen 12:1-2). The person who recorded these words, probably during the reign of Solomon, had already experienced their fulfillment. Under David and Solomon, Israel achieved its greatest territorial limits, with sovereign-vassal relationships to a number of Syro-Palestinian states, and with an image that left even the queen of Sheba breathless.

With the promises all fulfilled, the only thing remaining for the children of Abram and Sarai to do in the early monarchy was to be a blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen 12:3).<sup>3</sup> Hans Walter Wolff has found this vocation illustrated in subsequent stories in Genesis and Exodus, when Abraham makes unflagging intercessions for those who are perishing in Sodom, when Isaac shows readiness for peaceful agreement with the Philistines, when Jacob provides effective material aid for Laban and the Arameans, when Joseph's wise rule brings blessings to Egypt, and when the Israelites, via their worship at Sinai, bring about a blessing for Egypt.<sup>4</sup> The task of Abram and Sarai, according to Gen 12:3, is still to be completed by imperial Israel, to whom this text was addressed in the tenth century B.C.E.—and by all subsequent readers of this account who want to make the story of Abram and Sarai their own. Abram and Sarai illustrate the consistent biblical point that election is always to service and responsibility, and never to privilege.

Genesis 20 even gives Abraham the calling of a prophet. In this role he is not a social critic like an Amos, but rather an intercessor, whose prayers bring renewed wholeness to the household of the Philistine Abimelech.

## Covenant

Three major covenant traditions play a role in the Hebrew Scriptures. First, there is the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai, a covenant which first appears prominently in seventh century biblical accounts (Deuteronomy; Jeremiah). The author of Deuteronomy saw this covenant as a fulfillment of the covenant made with Israel's ancestors like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He believed that Israel, by obeying this covenant, would discover that the LORD would remain true to the promises made in the ancestral covenant (Deut 7:6-12). In fact, the deity's faithfulness to the ancestral covenant would be caused by Israel's obedience of the Sinai covenant.

The second covenant, the one God made with David (2 Sam 23; cf. 2 Sam 7; Ps 89), contained the promise that David's descendants would always occupy the royal throne in Jerusalem. This covenant and the territorial expansion of the land of Israel under David and Solomon are seen to be fulfillments of the third covenant, that had been made with Abraham according to Genesis 15. The description of the land promised to Abraham in Genesis 15 corresponds geo-

<sup>3</sup>"By you shall all the families of the earth be blessed." Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981), 151-52, presents a strong case for a reflexive translation: "And all the families of the earth are to bless themselves in you." He, too, insists that the promise made to Israel's ancestors reaches its goal only when it includes all the families of the earth, though his translation does not emphasize so clearly the agent-role of Israel in extending this blessing to others. Cf. Gen 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14; Ps 72:17.

<sup>4</sup>Hans Walter Wolff, "The Kerygma of the Yahwist," *Interpretation* 20 (1966): 131-58.

graphically with that of tenth century, imperial Israel.<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of the supposed relationship between Genesis 15 and the royal theology of the tenth century, Genesis 15 contains two incidents that have great importance for Jewish-Christian dialogue, and which often find Jews and Christians opting for different, though not incompatible interpretations.

As the chapter opens, Abram has apparently decided to adopt his servant Eliezer of Damascus as his heir, since he and Sarai remain childless. The LORD, however, vetoes this proposal and, instead, takes Abram outside to look at the stars. Abram had trouble believing in the possibility of a single son, but the LORD promised that the descendants of Abram and Sarai would actually be uncountable, just like the stars. Abram's response is straightforward and expressed in well-known Hebrew vocabulary—and it is the center of much controversy.

In the New Testament Paul uses this incident with Abram to explicate how a person is justified by faith, without deeds of the law. Since Abram shows his faith before he was circumcised in Genesis 17, he was reckoned to be righteous "without the works of the law," that is, without circumcision. This fits in well with Paul's well-known argument that Gentiles may become heirs of the promise through faith in Christ, without needing to first become Jews and undertake the burden of the law. Obviously, Paul's interpretation plays an important role in his own and subsequent Christian theology, but it is not directly relevant to understanding Gen 15:6 in its original context. It is important to note, nevertheless, that Paul constantly struggles with the question of how Gentiles may be included among the heirs of Abraham. While

later Christian theologians have often raised the opposite question, of the enduring validity of the covenant made with Abraham and Sarah, Paul wrestles more with how righteousness becomes available to *Gentiles*, and he believes that finally they and all Israel will be saved.

Even read in its own context, the passage about Abram's faith and righteousness in Gen 15:6 is open to more than one interpretation. The Jewish commentator Benno Jacob notes, "Righteousness is a claim to recognition and reward, earned by his [Abram's] conduct. . . . God leaves neither good will nor thought unrewarded."<sup>6</sup> Ephraim A. Speiser translated the verse: "He put his trust in Yahweh, who accounted it to his merit." <sup>7</sup> I take this interpretation to be a relatively standard Jewish understanding of this verse.

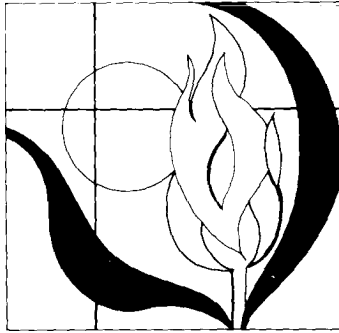
Gerhard von Rad, on the other hand, ascribes another definition to "righteousness" and so comes up with a different interpretation. In his judgment, a person is righteous who lives according to the requirements of a relationship. In a relationship created by God's promise, the proper human response

<sup>5</sup>"I give you this land from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates" (v. 18). This geographical horizon and the antiquity of the rite described in w. 7—18 suggest to me a tenth century *origin* for this passage, though those who detect a later, even deuteronomistic hand in the *present shape* of the passage may also be correct.

<sup>6</sup>*The First Book of the Bible Genesis*, trans. Ernest I. Jacob and Walter Jacob (New York: KTAV), 100.

<sup>7</sup>*Genesis*, Anchor Bible 1 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), 110. Cf. the similar translation and interpretation in W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah Genesis* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1974), 146.

is trust, and a trusting person is called righteous. Belief is an act of trust, a consent to God's plan in history.' Von Rad takes faith as a proper and necessary response, but not as merit that entails reward.



The ambiguity of the pronouns in the second half of Gen 15:6 permits a third credible interpretation. Abram's belief in the LORD is followed by a sentence that is usually translated: he (the LORD) reckoned this to him (Abram) as righteousness (or he [the LORD] reckoned this to Abram as merit). Recently, Manfred Oeming proposed that the two halves of the verse are parallel: Abram believed the LORD; aye, he (Abram) reckoned the LORD's repetition of the promise of an heir as proof of the divine grace. Abram reckoned the repetition and expansion of the divine promise as righteousness on the LORD's part.<sup>9</sup>

I suspect that these alternate proposals represent more than divergent philological insights. That is, if one contrasts the standard Jewish reading with that of the Lutheran Von Rad, one discovers that the different interpretations flow from different conclusions or presuppositions about the make-up of the

faith of Israel. On the Jewish side, talk of merit and reward; on the Christian side, talk of faith (or trust) as appropriate behavior. I hope that such divergences can be used, in the spirit of dialogue, as a way for one person better to understand the religious convictions of the other, not as a way to label one view right and the other view wrong.

## The Covenant of Pieces

The second half of Genesis 15 deals explicitly with covenant and with the promise of land rather than with the promise of descendants. Abram asks the LORD to reassure him that he will get the land. In response, the LORD asks him to assemble a number of animals—a heifer, a female goat, a ram—plus a turtledove and a pigeon. Abram then cut the animals in two pieces and arranged the two halves of each animal opposite each other. Later, after Abram fell into a deep sleep, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between the cut up animal pieces. On that day—and in that way—the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land."

The meaning of this strange rite is not provided though Jer 34:18-19 may provide a parallel. Jeremiah criticized a group of people who made a covenant to release their debt slaves when Jerusalem was being besieged by the Babylonian army. When the siege was lifted, these people reneged on their promise and took their slaves back. What intrigues us is the ritual by which this

<sup>9</sup>Genesis (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 180.

<sup>9a</sup>"Ist Genesis 15:6 ein Beleg für die Anrechnung des Glaubens zur Gerechtigkeit?" *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 95 (1983): 182-97.

covenant was made in the first place. Jeremiah refers to a calf which they cut in two and passed between, and he announces a divine word of judgment: "I will make [those people] like the calf which they cut in two and passed between its parts." Scholars have concluded that the men making this covenant had invoked a curse upon themselves when they made the agreement: Just as they had cut a calf in two, so they should be cut in two if they violated the agreement. One of the Sefire Treaties from the eighth century contains a similar self-imprecation: "As this calf is cut up, thus Mali' el and his nobles shall be cut up" (ANET 660).<sup>10</sup>

Returning to Genesis 15, we can now explain the mysterious rite by which the covenant with Abram was made. During this rite Abram is fast asleep—a deep sleep like that which befell Adam settled upon him. During his sleep a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between the pieces. The fire pot and the torch seem to be symbols for the LORD. Fire, flame, and smoke frequently accompany his theophanies in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The LORD is the one who passes between the cut up animals, and he is the one who invokes a self-imprecation on himself. Thus the LORD seems to offer Abram the following sign to assure him of the promise of the land: May I—the LORD!—be cut in pieces if I ever renege on the promise of the land!" The deity invokes upon himself a curse to underline the surety of his promise. Abram was given the kind of sign for which he had asked: "O LORD God, how am I to know that I shall possess the land?"

A Christian may find in this self-imprecation a symbol parallel to that which he or she finds in the cross. Among the many

meanings assigned to the crucifixion is the idea that it is God's way of making his promise to humankind more sure, more reliable, more credible. In asking people to believe, God says: "I am willing to do anything to make my promise credible. I will invoke a curse on my son if that will help people believe in me." Understood in this way, the cross has a function much like the ritual used in the covenant with Abram. In both cases God invokes upon himself a curse in order to make his promise more believable to his sons and daughters. While I would not expect my Jewish sisters and brothers to accept this meaning of the cross, I would hope that they could accept the continuity I have proposed between Genesis 15 and the crucifixion. The mutual gain might be substantial. Jews might see this interpretation of the cross as logically consistent with the way God made his promises to Abram and Sarai sure; Christians might see that the way God guarantees his promises in his revelation to them primarily repeats and underscores the types of promises the LORD made to Israel through Abram and Sarai.

## The Covenant in Genesis 17

A second account of the covenant with Abram and Sarai appears in Genesis 17. This

<sup>10</sup>Cf the excellent study of this ceremony by M. Weinfeld, "The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 90 (1970): 184-203.

"This is indeed a bold anthropomorphism though not unknown elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Note the implied self-imprecation in the oath formula "I lift up my hand to heaven and swear, As I live for ever" (Deut32:40).

covenant displays the characteristic vocabulary and style associated with the document called the Priestly writing. I would date this document to the period of Israel's exile.<sup>12</sup> This account makes the promise of the land and the covenant itself "everlasting" or "eternal." To mark the new status assigned to the patriarch and the matriarch they are assigned new names: Abram becomes Abraham, and Sarai becomes Sarah. Even the deity marks this new epoch with a shift in his self-designation. Up until now he has called himself Elohim (God); now he reveals his name as El-Shaddai, traditionally translated as God Almighty, but perhaps better understood as El of the Cosmic Mountain.

In this account Abram and Sarai are addressed as sojourners, *gerim*; perhaps we could render this word as "aliens" or "exiles." As aliens and exiles Abraham and Sarah are recipients of the covenant promise. Hence all future aliens and exiles, all future have-nots, can identify with them.

The way in which Sarah participates fully in this chapter is also important for both Jews and Christians today as we strive to be more inclusive in our language. God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah will be her name. I will bless her, and I will also give through her a son to you. Yes, I will bless her and she will become nations. Kings of peoples will come from her" (Gen 17:15-16).

The everlasting covenant announced in Genesis 17 is crucial for Jews and Christians. To the original audience in exile it offered assurance that the destruction of the temple and the loss of the land were not the end of God's relationship with his people. That relationship was based on an everlasting covenant, much like the everlasting covenant

made with Noah. The word behind that covenant was the same word by which God created the world. Israel in exile, therefore, could hope for restoration to the land and to their former worship life. That hope would become reality when God would remember his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, just as he had at the time of the Exodus from Egypt (Exod 6:5).

Genesis 17 is particularly important for Christians to hear for we have typically talked of old covenant and new covenant, Old Testament and New Testament, and sometimes given the impression—or actually stated—that the New has superseded the Old. It is foolish to ask how long an everlasting covenant will endure. It will last as long as the God who made it lasts, that is, forever. This God promises to take the people of Abraham and Sarah and be their God (17:8). He is the one who promises them the land as an ever-lasting possession. The rite of circumcision symbolizes one's membership in this covenant. This covenant itself is unilateral, non-conditional.

For Paul, Abraham was the father of those who have faith *even when he was uncircumcised*. For the Hebrew Scriptures, Abraham and Sarah were the parents of all the faithful, and Abraham and his sons bore circumcision as a sign of their relationship with God. In fact, circumcision was available beyond the ethnic boundaries of Israel. Abraham circumcised the slaves born in his house and those acquired by money in addition to his son Ishmael. Abraham, *the cir-*

<sup>12</sup>See Ralph W. Klein, *Israel in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), chapter 6, "When Memory is Hope: The Response to Exile in P."

*cumcised*, was the father of all those who believed!

Leviticus 26 is an alternate account of this priestly version of the covenant with Abraham. It envisages a time when the land will be devastated and when it will enjoy its Sabbaths. Those who survive the attack on the land will while away their time in exile. When Israel repents, however, the LORD promises that he will restore them to the land: "I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and I will remember my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land" (v. 42). And again: "I will for their sake remember the covenant with their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God" (v. 45).

## The Community

The call of Abraham and the covenants with Abraham and Sarah have as their goal the establishment of a people called Israel. So we read of a great nation in Gen 12:2 and of descendants as numerous as the stars in Gen 15:5. Genesis 17 speaks of a covenant between God and the ancestral pair that applied as well and equally to all their descendants. Exodus 6 adds: I take you for my people and I will be your God (v. 7).

Abraham and Sarah were promised the land forever, but the only land to which they ever held title was the cave and the field where their graves were to be located. When Sarah died, the narrative pauses to report de-tailed transactions with Ephron the Hittite that led to Abraham becoming a land holder for the first time (Genesis 23). Apart from ownership of this grave, Abraham and Sarah were sojourners, aliens, and exiles. Later

stories report how not only Sarah, but also Abraham, Rebekah, Isaac, Leah, and Jacob found their separate ways to this grave. They were gathered to their people, on their own piece of land. They were a community in death as well as in life.

Deuteronomy reports a covenant that Moses established in the plains of Moab, shortly before his own death. Moses invited Israel to enter the "sworn covenant" of the LORD so that God could establish them on that day as his people, his community, as he promised and as he had sworn to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Israel throughout history is understood to be part of this covenant in the plains of Moab, for this covenant is made not only with those who were present, "but with him who is not here with us this day as well as with him who stands here with us this day before the LORD our God" (Deut 29:15). The community of Israel extends horizontally during any period and vertically throughout human history.

The community emphasis in the Abraham tradition comes out clearly when the patriarch rescues Lot from the five invading Mesopotamian kings (Genesis 14), and when Abram refuses to take any booty from the battle for himself.

The Jewish and Christian emphasis on the whole people of God could not be more clearly expressed than in Abraham's famous prayer for the people of Sodom in Genesis 18. Who could forget his bargaining with the LORD, beseeching him to spare the wicked Cities of the Plain if they should contain 50, 45, 40, 30, 20, or, finally, 10 righteous persons? Should not the judge of all the earth do *m#pat* (right)?

Community solidarity . . . God remembered Abraham by sending *Lot* away from the

cities of the plain (Gen 19:29). The God who would remember Israel in Egypt, who promised to remember Noah by making the rainbow a reminder to himself, and whose memory of his everlasting covenant would be the trigger to restore Israel after the exile—that God is the one who remembered Abraham by sparing his nephew Lot. Abraham and Lot are bound together in community.

Community solidarity . . . Centuries later, when the Northern Kingdom was threatened by the war machine of the Aramean Hazael, the LORD was gracious to Israel and had compassion on them and turned toward them, because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He would not destroy them (*2 Kgs* 13:23).

Community solidarity . . . Before he died Abraham gave all he had to Isaac, but to the "sons of his old age," the children from his concubines, he gave generous gifts as he sent them away to the east, where they could not endanger Isaac in the land. Then he breathed his last in a good old age, an old man, and full of years. He was gathered to his people. Isaac and Ishmael, Jew and Arab, buried him in the cave of Machpelah, with Sarah his wife (Gen 25:5–10).

Israel understood *and* understands itself as the people of the God of Abraham (Ps 47:10). For both Jews and Gentiles Abraham and Sarah are our common parents (Rom 4:16). The prophet of the exile addressed the people as "the offspring of Abraham, who loves me" (Isa 41:8), and the LORD him-self told these offspring: "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God." (Isa 41:10). Later the same prophet exclaims: "Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for when he was but one I called him, and I blessed him and

made him many" (Isa 51:2). Abraham's transformation from one person to many people would be repeated as the problems of exile were resolved—such was the promise. The lineage back to one man, or one couple, establishes the unity of all Israel, of all the people of God.

When mothers or fathers told the stories of Abraham and Sarah to children as they tucked them into bed, before the biblical epic was ever written down, they were not only telling the story of the ancestral generation. They were telling the children their own story; they were telling our story. We are all called; we are all bound to God by covenantal promises. We are all part of the community of the people of the God of Sarah and Abraham.

One of my favorite morning prayers makes us all latterday Abrahams and Sarahs. It reads as follows: "Lord, God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us."

A Eucharistic prayer in the Lutheran tradition confesses: "You, God, have filled all creation with light and life; heaven and earth are full of your glory. Through Abraham and Sarah you promised to bless all nations. You rescued Israel, your chosen people."

In the context of Jewish Christian dialogue, one can only add, "And let **all** the people say, 'Amen.'"