THE PENTATEUCH PART I: GENESIS  
LESSON 9: Genesis 15:1- 17:27  
The Story of Abraham Continues: The Divine Promises Embodied in a Divine Covenant

Faithful Father,  
We are an impatient people.  Our lack of patience is reflected in our modern culture where with every act we expect an immediate response; we have become a people of the "instant on."  But our relationship with You, Lord, is a process that requires a patient trust that nurtures a growing love for You and a deeper understanding of Your will for our lives. Abram had to learn to trust You and to leave his life in Your hands.  He too was impatient, but he came to understand that impatience and lack of trust can only lead to disaster when one tries to manipulate Your plan to satisfy one's own desires and ambitions.  Please guide us in our study, Lord, of the lessons father Abraham had to learn about faith in You, about trust in Your plan for his life, and about the virtue of patience.  We pray in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.  Amen.

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*The God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abraham, while he was in Mesopotamia before settling in Haran, and said to him, "Leave your country, your kindred and your father's house for this country which I shall show you."  So he left Chaldaea and settled in Haran; and after his father died God made him leave that place and come to this land where you are living today.  God did not give him any property in this land or even a foothold, yet he promised to give it to him and after him to his descendants, childless though he was.*    
St. Stephen's homily from [Acts 7:2b-5](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/acts/acts7.htm#v2)

*Stock of Abraham, his servant, children of Jacob whom he chose!  He is Yahweh our God; his judgments touch the whole world.  He remembers his covenant for ever...*   
[Psalm 105:7-8a](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/psalms/psalm105.htm#v7)

In Genesis chapter 12 Abram accepted God's call to faith, and leaving his homeland he traveled to Canaan'the land God promised him. Later, Abram experienced a crisis of trust in God based upon his fear of suffering, but through the trial of Sarai's abduction and God's intervention he began to understand that God was the master of his destiny.  His reliance on God's blessing was further strengthened by God's guidance and protection in his war against the four kings of Mesopotamia, in his victory over them and in securing the return of his kinsman, Lot.  The victory over the Mesopotamians made Abram the most powerful political leader in the region.  But Abraham is not the hero of the book of Genesis'God is the real hero.  Affirming God's role as the master of history and defending the divinely inspired nature of the biblical text, Old Testament scholar Bruce K. Waltke wrote: *...let it be noted that the real hero of Genesis is the Lord and that, if the stories in Genesis about him are not inspired by heaven, they are fictitious.  Thus Sternberg rightly comments: "Were the narrative written or read as fiction, then God would turn from the lord of history into a creature of the imagination, with the most disastrous results"* (Waltke, *Genesis* page 24, quoting M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading,* [Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987], page 32).

And what are the "disastrous results" if the stories in Genesis are only myths?  If the stories in Genesis are only fiction then God's plan for man's salvation is fiction.  If God's plan is fiction then Jesus Christ came to fulfill nothing: there is no promise of redemption from sins or any hope in an eternal salvation, and mankind has no future beyond the fragile future of this present life.  But if we, like Abram, have faith and trust that God has the power to keep His promises, that there is a Master Plan for man's salvation, and that the climax of that plan was the death, burial, and Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth'the only begotten Son of God who was sent to fulfill the promise of [Genesis 3:15](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis3.htm#v15)'then there is reason for hope for our own salvation and for the salvation of all who accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Redeemer.

**Chapter 15: God's Covenant with Abram Part 1**

*Yahweh is the shield that protects you and the sword that leads you to triumph.*  
[Deuteronomy 33:29b](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/deuteronomy/deuteronomy33.htm#v29)

**Please read Genesis 15:1-6: Abram's Frustration and God's Assurance  
15:1*Some time later, the word of Yahweh came to Abram in a vision: 'Do not be afraid, Abram!  I am your shield and shall give you a very great reward.'* 2*'Lord Yahweh,' Abram replied, 'what use are your gifts, as I am going on my way childless?...* 3*Since you have given me no offspring,' Abram continued, 'a member of my household will be my heir\*.'* 4*Then Yahweh's word came to him in reply, 'Such a one will not be your heir; no, your heir will be the issue of your own body.'* 5*Then taking him outside, he said, 'Look up at the sky and count the stars if you can.  Just so will your descendants be,' he told him.* 6*Abram put his faith in Yahweh and this was reckoned to him as uprightness.*   
\***some texts read: *a servant of my house, Eliezer of Damascus, will be my heir,* and the Septuagint reads: *but the son of Masek my home-born female slave, this Eliezer of Damascus is mine heir* (*The Septuagint,* Hendrickson Publishers, 1999 edition, page 16).This may have been the man who was Abram's steward, the "second in command" over his household.

**Genesis 15:1:** *Some time later, the word of Yahweh came to Abram in a vision: 'Do not be afraid, Abram!  I am your shield and shall give you a very great reward.'*

The words "Some time later" link this part of the narrative to the events that took place in chapter 14 after Abram's victory over the armies of the Mesopotamian kings, when he refused to accept a reward from Bera, king of Sodom.  God is Abram's kingly authority and He will bestow a reward on His faithful commander for securing the future salvation-kingdom for God's holy people, Abram's descendants the children of Israel.  The words "Do not be afraid" also link this part of the narrative back of Abram's rejection of King Bera's offer.  Having offended the most powerful Canaanite king in the region, Abram has a good reason to be fearful.([1](http://www.agapebiblestudy.com/genesis/Lesson_9.htm" \l "end1))

**Question:** How did God describe Himself in announcing to Abram that he was to receive a reward?  Hint: the same word is found in [Dt 33:29](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/deuteronomy/deuteronomy33.htm#v29); [2 Sam 22:3](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/2samuel/2samuel22.htm#v3); [2 Chr 17:17](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/3chronicles/2chronicles17.htm#v17); [Ps 18:35-37](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/psalms/psalm18.htm#v35); [Ez 23:24](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/ezekiel/ezekiel23.htm#v24); [27:10](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/ezekiel/ezekiel27.htm#v10).  
**Answer:** Yahweh called Himself Abram's war shield.

The covenant formation with Abram in this chapter, coming just after his victory over the Mesopotamian invasion, can be interpreted as God, the King of Kings, rewarding His faithful vassal.([2](http://www.agapebiblestudy.com/genesis/Lesson_9.htm" \l "end2))  In Abram's confrontation with the King of Sodom he declined any reward for his victory over the enemy forces of the King of Elam.  Now God, identifying Himself to Abram in the military symbol of a shield, *magen* in Hebrew (*Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon,* page 171), provides Abram with a reward he refused to receive from the king of Sodom.  The Hebrew text uses the word *sakar* [reward]in God's promise of a great "reward" (*Brown-Driver-Brigs Hebrew-English Lexicon,* page 969).  This Hebrew word is used in the sense of the compensation or recompense extended those who have provided a valuable service, for example to priests who serve Yahweh in the Sanctuary ([Num 18:31](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/numbers/numbers18.htm#v31)) or soldiers who have conducted a military campaign.  It is the same word that will be used in reference to the spoils of Egypt that God will give to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon as wages for his army ([Ez 29:19](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/ezekiel/ezekiel29.htm" \l "v19)).  The same word is also found in [Isaiah 40:10](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/isaiah/isaiah40.htm#v10) in the passage that describes Lord Yahweh coming with power and authority, bringing his reward with him for those who remain loyal, and again in [Isaiah 62:11](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/isaiah/isaiah62.htm#v11), proclaiming the reward of the Lord's faithful servants in the Messianic Age (M. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview,* Two Age Press, 2000*,* page 324).

**Question:** What is Abram's great reward for his service to Yahweh in preserving the "Promised Land" from foreign invaders?  See [Genesis 12:1-3](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis12.htm#v1) and [15:18](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis15.htm#v18).  
**Answer:** As a reward God grants Abram a covenant, forming a family bond of kinship between God the Great King and Abram his faithful vassal/ servant.  The covenant formation provides  assurance of the fulfillment of the promises God made to Abram in [Genesis 12:1-3](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis12.htm#v1) when Abram was promised land, descendants, and a world-wide blessing.

In his meeting with the King Bera of Sodom ([Gen 14:17-24](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis14.htm#v17)), instead of swearing a covenant oath of loyalty to Bera, Abram rejected his offer and swore an oath repudiating him ([Gen 14:22-24](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis14.htm#v22)).  Abram rejected a reward that would make him the king of Sodom's servant ([Gen 14:21-24](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis14.htm#v21)), and now his uncompromised loyalty as Yahweh's servant was to be rewarded.  Commenting on the use of the Hebrew words for "shield" and "reward" that can be understood in a military context and as a link to the defeat of the Mesopotamians in chapter 14, biblical scholar Meredith Kline wrote: *Coming on the heels of this episode, the Lord's word to Abraham (*[*Gen 15:1*](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis15.htm#v1)*) has the character of a royal grant to an officer of the king for faithful military service.  God identifies himself by the military figure of a shield (cf* [*Dt 33:29*](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/deuteronomy/deuteronomy33.htm#v29)*;* [*Ps 18:2*](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/psalms/psalm18.htm#v2)*), otherwise read as suzerain, and promises: "Your reward will be very great" [...].  The imagery of* [*Genesis 15:1*](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis15.htm#v1) *is that of the Great King honoring Abraham's notable exhibition of compliance with covenant duty by the reward of a special grant that would more than make up for whatever enrichment he had foregone at the hands of the king of Sodom for the sake of faithfulness to Yahweh, his Lord* (M. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue,* pages 323- 324).

There is, however, only one reward that Abram has in mind.

**Genesis 15:2:** *'Lord Yahweh,' Abram replied, 'what use are your gifts, as I am going on my way childless?* In his distress and frustration Abram addressed God with a title meaning "Sovereign Yahweh," or "Master Yahweh," (*Adonai Yahweh,* repeated in [15:8](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis15.htm#v8)) a rare title for Yahweh in Scripture that is used when pleading with God ([Dt 3:24](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/deuteronomy/deuteronomy3.htm" \l "v24); [9:26](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/deuteronomy/deuteronomy9.htm#v26); [Jdg 6:22](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/judges/judges6.htm#v22); [2 Sam 7:18-20](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/2samuel/2samuel7.htm#v18), [29](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/2samuel/2samuel7.htm#v29); [1 Kgs 2:26](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/1kings/1kings2.htm#v26); [8:53](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/1kings/1kings8.htm#v53) ).  Abram then brought to Yahweh's attention a major obstacle to the fulfillment of the promises made in [Genesis 12:1-3](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis12.htm#v1).  This is the first time Abram has verbally expressed his fears to God.  He will speak to Yahweh infrequently, assuming the proper role of the faithful servant who hears his Lord and acts upon His commands.

**Question:** In this passage Abram wanted some specific details about "the plan" concerning the promise of descendants.  What question did Abram ask God in this passage and what does Abram see as a major problem that must be resolved before the promise concerning descendants can be fulfilled?  
**Answer:** *'... what use are your gifts, as I am going on my way childless?  Since you have given me no offspring...'*Abram and Sarai have been married for many years, and yet God has not granted them the gift of any children.

**Genesis 15:3b:***Abram continued, 'a member of my household will be my heir.* The Septuagint adds: *but the son of Masek my home-born female slave, this Eliezer of Damascus is mine heir* (*The Septuagint,* Hendrickson Publishers, 1999, page 16).The Jewish Masoretic text interprets the unexplained Hebrew words *ben meseq* (*Interlinear Hebrew-English* Bible, page 33) as "a member of my household," while the Greek translation (Septuagint) of Genesis 15:3 renders it "son (ben) of Masek (*meseq*)." Abram was not only gently reproaching God for not giving him children, but he was also broaching the subject of having adopted an heir.

The mention that Eliezer is from Damascus may be another link to the battle with the Mesopotamians, but it also indicates that Eliezer is not the son of Abram born of the slave Masek; Eliezer and his mother originally came from Damascus.  Eliezer of Damascus is a mysterious figure who is never mentioned again, and it cannot be determined what his connection was to Abram other than he may have been Abram's chief steward, as he is identified in some translations like the King James Bible (for other references to stewards see [Gen 43:19](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis43.htm#v19); [44:1](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis44.htm#v1), [4](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis44.htm#v4); [1 Kgs 16:9](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/1kings/1kings16.htm#v9); [Mt 20:8](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/matthew/matthew20.htm#v8); [Lk 8:3; 12:42](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/luke/luke8.htm#v3); [16:1-3](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/luke/luke16.htm#v1), [8](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/luke/luke16.htm#v8); [Tit 1:7](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/titus/titus1.htm#v7)).

The discovery of the ancient city of Nuzi, a mid 2nd millennium BC Hurrian provincial capital located near modern Kirkuk, Iraq, yielded an archive of over 3,500 cuneiform tablets.  Recorded on the tablets, Bible scholars have found many subjects including sociologic/economic conditions and practices common to the 1st and 2nd millenniums BC that are revealed in the Bible, proving that the biblical text accurately reflects the social customs of the times.  Some of the Nuzi tablets addressed the possibility of adopting one's own slave if there was no heir to inherit a man's estate.  If an heir was subsequently born, the slave relinquished his rights as the heir (*The Anchor Bible Dictionary, vol. 4, "Nuzi,"* pages 1156, 1160-61).

**Question:** Upon whom did Abram place the blame for Sarai's bareness?  Why was being childless a great sadness for Abram and Sarai?  
**Answer:** His mild reproach is that God has not given him children. For Abram and Sarai, and for other men and women of their time, to remain childless was considered a curse while bearing children was seen as a great blessing.  Children were a family's investment in the future.

**Question:** Who is curiously omitted as a possible heir?  
**Answer:** Lot.

It is interesting that Abram does not consider Lot to be his heir.  Lot is living a few miles away in Sodom.  Abram loves Lot, but the distance between them must be more than a physical separation.  It is also interesting that in the literal Hebrew Abram uses the verb "going/ walking on my way childless," which suggests that life is a journey.  This same verb was used in [Genesis 12:1](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis12.htm#v1), [4](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis12.htm#v4), [5](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis12.htm#v5), [9](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis12.htm#v9); and [13:3](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis13.htm#v3).  Genuine faith is moving forward on one's life journey, trusting God with your life and placing the direction of your journey in His hands, even when all else may seem to be lost.

**Genesis 15:4-6:** 4*Then Yahweh's word came to him in reply, 'Such a one will not be your heir; no, your heir will be the issue of your own body.'* 4*Then taking him outside, he said, 'Look up at the sky and count the stars if you can.  Just so will your descendants be,' he told him.* 4*Abram put his faith in Yahweh and this was reckoned to him as uprightness.*

The "coming of the word of Yahweh" is a phrase that is unique to this passage in Genesis.   It is a phrase rarely used in Scripture.  I is derived from a root that is connected to God's revelations to a prophet ([Num 24:4](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/numbers/numbers24.htm#v4), [16](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/numbers/numbers24.htm#v16); [Jer 27:1](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/jeremiah27.htm#v1); [29:30](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/jeremiah/jeremiah29.htm#v30); [Ez 13:7](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/ezekiel/ezekiel13.htm#v7)).  It is also a phrase that is used in other books of Scripture in the divine call of prophet to serve Yahweh (i.e.: [Jer 1:2](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/jeremiah/jeremiah1.htm#v2); [Ez 1:3](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/ezekiel/ezekiel1.htm#v3); [Hos 1:1](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/hosea/hosea1.htm#v1); [Joel 1:1](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/joel/joel1.htm#v1); [Hag 1:1](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/haggai/haggai1.htm#v1) etc.).  The inference in this passage with the formula "Yahweh's word came to him" and the use of the Hebrew word for "vision" in [Genesis 15:1](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis15.htm#v1) indicates that Abram was considered to be God's prophet (see visions given to prophets in [Is 2:1](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/isaiah/isaiah2.htm#v1); [Ez 1:2](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/ezekiel/ezekiel1.htm#v2); [Dan 7:1](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/daniel/daniel7.htm#v1); [Amos 1:1](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/amos/amos1.htm#v1); etc.).  Abram's role as a prophet is made explicit in [Genesis 20:7](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis20.htm#v7) and [Psalm 105:15](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/psalms/psalm105.htm#v15).

**Question:** What promise did God give Abram in [Genesis 15:5](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis15.htm#v5)?    
**Answer:** Abram's descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky!

Using hyperbole, as God did in His promise of descendants in [Genesis 13:16](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis13.htm#v16), God called Abram to step out of his tent and observe the sky and its myriad of stars.   It is a promise of descendants using the visual sign of the stars that will be repeated to Abram and his descendants five times ([Gen 15:5](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis15.htm#v5), [22:17](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis22.htm#v17); [26:4](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis26.htm#v4); [32:12](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis32.htm#v12); [Dt 10:22](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/deuteronomy/deuteronomy10.htm#v22)).  This verse indentified Abram's encounter with Yahweh as taking place at night when the sky was full of stars.  When God gave human beings a sign, it was always a visible sign that they could see or do (worship on the Sabbath: [Ex 31:13](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/exodus/exodus31.htm#v13)).  The visible sign was meant to give comfort and to remind them of God's promises, as in the case of Noah and the covenant sign of God's war bow suspended in the heavens from horizon to horizon ([Gen 9:12-16](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis9.htm#v12)).  For other visible "signs" of God's works see [Ex 8:19/23- 20/24](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/exodus/exodus8.htm#v19); [13:9](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/exodus/exodus13.htm#v9); [31:12-13](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/exodus/exodus31.htm#v12), [17](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/exodus/exodus31.htm#v17); [Is 7:14](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/isaiah/isaiah7.htm#v14); [Lk 11:30](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/luke/luke11.htm#v30); [Rom 4:11](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/romans/romans4.htm#v11); etc.

**Question:** What was Abram's response to God's renewed promise and clarification of the greatness of the promise?  See [Genesis 15:6](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis15.htm#v6)  
**Answer:** *Abram put his faith in Yahweh and this was reckoned to him as uprightness.* Yahweh acknowledged that Abram's act of trust and faith in God's promise was an act worthy of reward.

The New Testament Book of Hebrews teaches: *Only faith can guarantee the blessings that we hope for, or prove the existence of realities that are unseen* (New Jerusalem Bible).The New American Bible translation reads: *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen* ([Hebrews 11:1](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/hebrews/hebrews11.htm#v1)).  The passage continues: *It is for their faith that our ancestors are acknowledged* ([Heb 11:2](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/hebrews/hebrews11.htm#v2); see [CCC 146](http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p1s1c3a1#146.htm)).  In their New Testament letters to the Church, St. Paul and St. James referred to Abram's faith which was credited to him as righteousness in [Genesis 15:6](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis15.htm#v6) to teach that justification depends on living and active faith.  St. Paul expressed this active faith as *the obedience of faith* in [Romans 1:5](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/romans/romans1.htm#v5) and defined it as faith that is not dependant on *works of the Law* as stipulated in the old Sinai Covenant ([Romans 3:27-28](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/romans/romans3.htm#v27)).  In [Romans 3:38](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/romans/romans3.htm#v38) Paul wrote: *faith is what counts, since as we see it, a person is justified by faith and not by doing what the Law tells him to do.* Paul was not saying that our "works," that is the "works of God working through us," the definition of "active faith," has no value.  He was instead contrasting the Law of the Sinai Covenant, which was engraved on stone and only served to condemn men and women of their sins, with the kind of faith that comes from an interior Law, written on human hearts and which works through love ([Gal 5:6](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/galatians/galatians5.htm#v6)).  In [Romans 8:2](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/romans/romans8.htm#v2) Paul called this interior Law "the Law of the Holy Spirit."  St. James emphasized that it is this kind of living active faith that is pleasing to God because faith without the deeds of love toward our fellow man and obedience to God is dead faith ([James 2:17](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/james/james2.htm#v17), [26](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/james/james2.htm#v26)).

There is no contradiction between St. Paul's teaching and St. James' teaching.  St. Paul was anxious to dismiss the view that a human being can earn salvation without having faith in Christ.  One cannot come to salvation through "works alone;" this would be a condition of self-made sanctity, usurping the sovereignty of God.  We are not just called to be "good;" we are called to be "supernaturally good."  These are not our works or deeds, but these are the works of God working through us. James taught that salvation cannot come from "faith alone" because faith cannot be separated from deeds.  James used Abraham's example of continuing faith, trust, and obedience to God, as expressed in Abraham's ordeal in Genesis chapter 22, as an example of living and active faith: *Was not Abraham our father justified by his deed, because he offered his son Isaac on the altar? So you can see that his faith was working together with his deeds; his faith became perfect by what he did.  In this way the Scripture was fulfilled: Abraham put his faith in God, and this was considered as making him upright; and he received the name "friend of God.*St. James taught that works/deeds demonstrate the existence of genuine faith([James 2:14-26](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/james/james2.htm#v14); [CCC 1814-16](http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p3s1c1a7.htm#1814); [2001](http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p3s1c3a2.htm#2001)).

**Please read Genesis 15:7-21: The Ratification Rite of the Abrahamic Covenant and the Prophecy of the Egyptian Exile  
15:7*He then said to him, 'I am Yahweh who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldaeans to give you this country as your possession.'* 8*Lord Yahweh,' Abram replied, 'how can I know that I shall possess it?'* 9*He said to him, 'Bring me a three-year old heifer, a three-year old she-goat, a three-year old ram, a turtledove and a young pigeon.'* 10*He brought him all these, split the animals down the middle and placed each half opposite the other; but the birds he did not divide.* 11*And whenever birds of prey swooped down on the carcasses, Abram drove them off.* 12*Now, as the sun was on the point of setting, a trance fell on Abram, and a deep dark dread descended on him.* 13*Then Yahweh said to Abram, 'Know this for certain, that your descendants will be exiles in a land not their own, and be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years.* 14*But I shall bring judgment on the nation that enslaves them and after this they will leave, with many possessions.* 15*For your part, you will join your ancestors in peace; you will be buried at a happy old age.* 16*In the fourth generation they will come back here, for until then the iniquity of the Amorites will not have reached its full extent.'* 17*When the sun had set and it was dark, there appeared a smoking firepot and a flaming torch passing between the animals' pieces.* 18*That day Yahweh made a covenant with Abram in these terms: 'To your descendants I give this country, from the River of Egypt to the Great River, the River Euphrates,* 19*the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites,* 20*the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim,* 21*the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.'***

In Genesis 15:7 Yahweh restated His promise to give Abram and his descendants the land of Canaan using the introductory formula "I am Yahweh."  This was an introduction common to covenant agreements of ancient Near Eastern kingly proclamations and royal grants.  The words "I am" followed by the name of the king granting the decree in the introduction to the document was meant to establish the unquestionable authority of the proclamation that followed (Waltke, page 242).  Most Near Eastern ancient covenant documents are organized in five parts with "part one" being a brief summary of the history of the two parties (the king and the other party addressed in the document), which historians call the "historical prologue." For more information on the covenant treaty format in Sacred Scripture see the both the Charts/Covenants and Documents/Covenants sections of the Agape Bible Study website.

**Question:** What is the historical prologue to Yahweh's covenant with Abram?  
**Answer:** The statement in Genesis 15:7 that Yahweh called Abram to come out from Ur to give Abram the land of Canaan ("this country") as his possession: *'I am Yahweh who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldaeans to give you this country as your possession.'*

**Question:** Abram had faith in God.  An example of his faith was that he set out on faith from Ur of the Chaldaeans to go to the land of Canaan, but did Abram have perfect, unshakable faith?  What is the significance of his request in Genesis 15:8?  
**Answer:**  No, his faith was not perfect or unshakable.  Abram was obedient but his faith needed strengthening and so he asked God for a sign.

Faith in God, like salvation and justification, is an on-going process not a one time event (CCC [161-62](http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p1s1c3a1.htm#161), [166](http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p1s1c3a1.htm#166); [1987-95](http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p3s1c3a2.htm#1987)).  In Hebrews the inspired writer recorded that Abraham was justified by his faith when he set out for Canaan ([Heb 11:8](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/hebrews/hebrews11.htm#v8)), in [Genesis 15:6](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis15.htm#v6) his faith was reckoned as righteous because he put his faith in God, and again Abraham's faith was counted as righteousness in [Genesis 22](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis22.htm) when he offered up his son, Isaac ([Heb 11:17-19](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/hebrews/hebrews11.htm#v17)).  Abraham's growing faith, strengthened in his faith journey, taught him to trust God to the point that he was able to pass the test of faith when God commanded him to offer his beloved son Isaac in sacrifice.

**Question:** What was Abram's second question concerning God's plan to give him descendants to rule over the land?    
**Answer:** *'Lord Yahweh,' Abram replied, 'how can I know that I shall possess it?'*

**Genesis 15:9-11:** 9*He said to him, 'Bring me a three-year old heifer, a three-year old she-goat, a three-year old ram, a turtledove and a young pigeon.'* 10*He brought him all these, split the animals down the middle and placed each half opposite the other; but the birds he did not divide.* 11*And whenever birds of prey swooped down on the carcasses, Abram drove them off.*

In response to Abram's request, Yahweh sealed the covenant promise with a very bizarre sacrificial ritual in which Abram was to sacrifice his wealth in animals.  The Hebrew word translated in most English translations as "a three-year old" is *meshuleshet* [may-shu-lay-shet], which can be translated as "the third born," or "three years old," or "part of a triplet," meaning 3 of a kind, or of triple-A quality (*Brown-Driver-Briggs,* page 1026).  Whatever the original intention of the word, the significance of the "threeness" indicates fullness, importance, and perfection, and to Christians suggests an action of the Most Holy Trinity in Abram's rite of covenant formation.

**Question:** What did Yahweh require Abram to do?  
**Answer:** He was to bring three (three animals, or three year old, etc.) of 5 different animals: cattle, sheep, goats, pigeons, and turtle-doves.  Three of the kinds of sacrificed animals (the calves, sheep, and goats) Abram was commanded to split down the middle, placing each half opposite the other.  He was to guard the sacrifice until sundown.

These 5 kinds of animals were to become the only animals that could be offered up in sacrifice to Yahweh in the sacrificial system of the Sinai Covenant ([Lev 1:2](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/leviticus/leviticus1.htm#v2), [14](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/leviticus/leviticus1.htm#v14)). The sacrificial animals of other ancient Near Eastern cultures included the donkey and young dogs, which are mentioned in ancient texts in association with covenant ratification rituals (Kline, page 297).

Sundown was the beginning of the next day.  Abram's vision began at night ([Gen 15:5](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis15.htm#v5)), he killed the animals the next day, butchering the large animals by cutting them in half'a feat that must have taken him all day.  The birds were not cut in half. This was a ritual of cutting a covenant became an established norm, with the understanding that he who broke the covenant was to fall to the same fate as the severed animals.  The 6th century BC prophet Jeremiah mentioned such a ritual in speaking for Yahweh concerning those who had broken covenant with Him: *As for the people who have broken my covenant, who have not observed the terms of the covenant which they made before me, I shall treat them like the calf that people cut in two to pass between its pieces* ([Jer 34:18](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/jeremiah/jeremiah34.htm" \l "v8)).  The smell of the dead meat attracted birds of prey, which Abram drove off.  In this part of the narrative the daylight was fading and night was coming.  As Abram fell into a deep sleep, reminiscent of Adam's deep sleep on the sixth day of Creation ([Gen 2:21](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis2.htm#v21)), Yahweh gave Abram a prophecy concerning the descendants Yahweh promised him ([Gen 15:12-16](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis15.htm#v12)).

One question that is often asked is "why weren't the birds split into two pieces like the other animals?" Some scholars suggest that the birds were considered too small to split, but it was certainly possible for Abram to divide the birds with a knife. Under the liturgical sacrificial requirements of the Sinai Covenant these are the five kinds of animals to be offered in sacrifice on Yahweh's altar of burnt offerings: cattle, goats, sheep, turtle doves and pigeons. While the larger animals were to be skinned and the carcasses cut into pieces ([Lev 1:6](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/leviticus/leviticus1.htm#v6)) the birds were to be offered whole, but split down the middle without separating the halves ([Lev 1:14-17](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/leviticus/leviticus1.htm#v14)). The pigeon and the turtle dove will be the "poor man's sacrifice" 'this is sacrifice that Mary and Joseph offered when Jesus was presented at the Temple in Jerusalem when he was a baby 40 days old ([Lk 2:22-24](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/luke/luke2.htm" \l "v22)).

Cutting the animals in half fulfills the "cutting" of the covenant. Jewish tradition suggests that not cutting the birds may signify God's mercy toward His covenant partners. There might also be a significance link between the numbers of the animals and the numbers of the pieces when the animals were divided. There were five animals'five is the number of grace and power, but when the three larger animals were split there were six parts of animal bodies together with the two birds which yielded eight animal parts. Three is the number of the Godhead (Trinity), six is the number of man, and eight is the number of restoration, rebirth, and salvation (see the document "[The Significance of Numbers in Scripture.](http://www.agapebiblestudy.com/documents/the%20significance%20of%20numbers%20in%20scripture.htm)"

The fathers of the Church saw a separation between carnal man and spiritual man in the symbolism of the cut and uncut animals. St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, wrote: *And it is said, "But the birds divided he not," because carnal people are divided among themselves. But those who are spiritual are not divided at all, whether they seclude themselves from the busy conversation of humankind, like the turtledove, or dwell among them, like the pigeon. For both birds are simple and harmless, signifying that even in the Israelite people, to which that land was to be given, there would be individuals who were children of the promise and heirs of the kingdom that is to remain in eternal felicity* (*City of God*, 16.24; *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, vol. I*, page 33). St. Caesarius, Bishop of Arles, had the same interpretation: *"The birds," says Scripture, "he did not cut in two." Why is this, brothers? Because in the Church catholic (universal), carnal people are divided but spiritual people are not. And, as Scripture says, they are separated one against the other. Why are carnal people divided and set against each other? Because all wicked lovers of the world do not cease to have divisions and scandals among each other. For this reason they are divided since they are opposed to one another. However, the birds, that is, spiritual souls, are not divided. Why not? Because they have "one heart and one soul in the Lord." [..]. For this reason Abraham divided those animals into two parts, but the birds he did not divide* (*Sermon on Genesis 82.2*, quoting [*Acts 4:32*](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/acts/acts4.htm#v32)*; Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, vol. I*, pages 33-34).

**Genesis 15:12-16:** 12*Now, as the sun was on the point of setting, a trance fell on Abram, and a deep dark dread descended on him.* 13*Then Yahweh said to Abram, 'Know this for certain, that your descendants will be exiles in a land not their own, and be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years.* 14*But I shall bring judgment on the nation that enslaves them and after this they will leave, with many possessions.* 15*For your part, you will join your ancestors in peace; you will be buried at a happy old age.* 16*In the fourth generation they will come back here, for until then the iniquity of the Amorites will not have reached its full extent.'*

**Question:** What was Abram's physical state during the covenant ritual that secured for Abram's descendants the salvation-kingdom that was going be the holy nation of Israel, and how did his condition link him to both Adam and Christ?  
**Answer:** God put Abram into a death-like sleep.  God put Adam in a death-like state when He created Eve ([Gen 2:21](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis2.htm#v21)).  Abram's death-like state, necessary in this act of covenant formation, was symbolic of Christ's death on the Cross which was a necessary action in God's plan for securing a New Covenant for the people of God and the salvation-kingdom that would become mankind's vehicle of salvation.  Christ's death on the Cross, a necessary act to secure His New Covenant bride, the Church, was also prefigured in Adam's death-like state necessary to receive his bride, Eve.

Old Testament scholar Dr. Meredith Kline notes the typological connection between Abram and Christ in this passage, writing that Abram's *symbolic actions* [are] *prophetic of the sacrificial act of obedience of the Messiah, the meritorious work that secured the ultimate salvation-kingdom for God's people of all times.  In Genesis 15 it was the oath-passage of the Lord through the way of death* (M. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue,* page 326).  The prophet Daniel also experienced a death like sleep connected with a divine revelation in [Daniel 8:18](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/daniel/daniel8.htm#v18) and [10:9](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/daniel/daniel10.htm#v9).

**Question:** What were the various points of the prophecy God revealed to Abram?  When was the prophecy to be fulfilled?  
**Answer:** The prophecy was to be fulfilled at the time of Abram's great grandson Joseph son of Abram's grandson Jacob (renamed Israel) and during the Exodus experience:

* Abram's descendants will be exiles in a foreign land = Egypt ([Gen 46:1-27](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis46.htm#v1)).
* They will be enslaved and oppressed for 400 years ([Ex 1:8-14](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/exodus/exodus1.htm#v8); [12:40](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/exodus/exodus12.htm#v40)).
* God will bring judgment on the nation that enslaved these sons of Abram and they will leave with many possessions ([Ex 12:35-36](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/exodus/exodus12.htm#v35)).
* In the fourth generation after entering Egypt Abram's descendants will leave Egypt and return to Canaan.\*
* Abram will die a happy old age (he was 175 years old when he died in [Gen 25:7-8](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis25.htm#v7)).

\*The prophecy of the four hundred years and the return to Canaan four generations after entering Egypt from the time of Jacob/ Israel is a rounded number with each generation spanning 100 years = (1) Levi, son of Jacob/Israel; (2) Kohath, grandson;([3](http://www.agapebiblestudy.com/genesis/Lesson_9.htm" \l "end3)) Amran, great-grandson;([4](http://www.agapebiblestudy.com/genesis/Lesson_9.htm" \l "end4)) Moses, great-great-grandson of Jacob/Israel.  A more precise number of 430 years is given in [Exodus 12:40-41](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/exodus/exodus12.htm#v40); [Acts 7:6](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/acts/acts7.htm#v6); [13:20](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/acts/acts13.htm#v20) and [Galatians 3:17](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/galatians/galatians3.htm#v17).

**Genesis 15:16:** *In the fourth generation they will come back here, for until then the iniquity of the Amorites will not have reached its full extent.'*

**Question:** Who were the Amorites and why will God not dispossess them until their wickedness reaches "its full extent"?  See [Genesis 10:16](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis10.htm#v16); [14:7](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis14.htm#v7), [13](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis14.htm#v13); [48:22](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis48.htm#v22); [Josh 5:1](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/joshua/joshua5.htm#v1) and [10:5ff](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/joshua/joshua10.htm#v5).

How is the judgment on the Amorites compared to God's judgment on the pre-flood people and the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah?  See [Genesis 6:5-6](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis6.htm#v5), [13](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis6.htm#v13); [18:20-21](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis18.htm#v20).  
**Answer:**

* The Amorites (sons of Ammon) were a pre-Israelite people listed in the Table of Nations ([Gen 10:16](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis10.htm#v16)).
* They were descendants of Ham and Canaan who occupied settlements across most of Canaan.
* Some of them lived near the Dead Sea in was at this time the Valley of Siddim ([Gen 14:7](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis14.htm#v7)).
* Abram's allies Mamre and Eschol were Amorites ([14:13](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis14.htm#v13)).  The kings who ruled western Palestine at the time of the Israelite conquest of Canaan were Amorites ([Josh 5:1](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/joshua/joshua5.htm#v1); [10:5ff](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/joshua/joshua10.htm#v5)).
* Shechem was called an Amorite city ([Gen 48:22](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis48.htm#v22)).

Israel's conquest of Canaan at God's command was not based on naked aggression but on God's justice.  God did not judge the Amorites until their wickedness was beyond measure, just as He did not judge the pre-flood people until their wickedness was extreme ([Gen 6:5-6](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis6.htm#v5), [13](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis6.htm#v13)), and the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah until their wickedness had "reached its full extent" ([Gen 18:20-21](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis18.htm#v20)).

**Question:** Does God show favoritism in His judgments?  
**Answer:** Absolutely not. The time will come when God will also judge the sinfulness of Israel.  At that time, during the period of the Divided Monarchy, both Israel (722 BC) and Judah (587/6 BC) will be dispossessed of the salvation-kingdom ([2 Kng 17:7-23](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/2kings/2kings17.htm#v7)).

Among the Ugaritic texts, written in c. 1400BC and discovered at the ruins of the ancient city of Ugarit on the Syrian coast in 1929, are tablets that described the iniquities of the Amorites.  According to the tablets, they worshipped their pagan gods in acts of violence and sexual perversions (W. F. Albright*, Archeology and the Religion of Israel, 4th ed.,* Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, Baltimore, 1956, pages 71-84).

**Genesis 15:17:** *When the sun had set and it was dark, there appeared a smoking firepot and a flaming torch passing between the animals' pieces.*

In this covenant ritual God passed between the parts of the sacrificed animals, binding Himself by oath to the covenant with Abram.

**Question:** How is Yahweh's presence in this ritual manifested?  
**Answer:** The smoking fire-pot and the flaming torch passing between the animal pieces is in essence Yahweh Himself swearing an oath of fidelity to the covenant.

The word used in Hebrew for "firepot" is *tannur*, which is an archaic term in Hebrew for "oven."  It is an oven in the sense of a brazier of the sort used for burning incense the liturgical services of the Sinai Covenant and in a Catholic Mass.

**Question:** In what other ways will the presence of Yahweh be manifested in smoke and/or fire?  
**Answer:** The smoking firepot and flaming torch represents Yahweh's presence in the same way the burning bush revealed God's presence to Moses ([Ex 3:2](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/exodus/exodus3.htm#v2)), the pillar cloud and pillar of fire revealed God's presence to the children of Israel in the Exodus experience ([Ex 13:21](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/exodus/exodus13.htm#v21)), and in the cloud on the summit of Mt. Sinai ([Ex 19:16](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/exodus/exodus19.htm#v16); [24:15-16](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/exodus/exodus24.htm#v15)) that was a manifestation of the Glory Cloud, in Hebrew the *Shekinah* ([Ex 16:10](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/exodus/exodus16.htm#v10); [19:9](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/exodus/exodus19.htm#v9); [34:5](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/exodus/exodus34.htm#v5); [40:34-38](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/exodus/exodus40.htm#v34); [Lev 16:2](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/leviticus/leviticus16.htm#v2); [Num 19:15-22](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/numbers/numbers19.htm#v15); etc.).

The purpose of the cutting of the animals becomes clear in the words used in Genesis 15:18: *Yahweh made (cut) a covenant with Abram...*  The Hebrew verb *krt,* which is usually translated as "made" or "concluded," in Hebrew literally means "to cut."  A covenant with Abram was literally and symbolically "cut"'a covenant sealed in blood and in which the covenant participants bound themselves by oath to suffer the same death as the animals if either party did not fulfill the promises of the covenant ([Jer 34:18](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/jeremiah/jeremiah34.htm" \l "v18)).  Oddly, it is only God who binds Himself as responsible for keeping this perpetual covenant.  It is an act that only makes sense in the context of Christ's sacrifice on the altar of the Cross.

In this bizarre scene the smoking fire pot and the flaming torch become the legs of God, walking the valley of death between the split bodies of the dead animals and taking the covenant curse upon Himself to keep the covenant with Abraham and his descendants.  God's action prefigures the journey of Christ, taking the covenant curse upon Himself, as He walked through the valley of death to offer Himself up on the altar of the Cross, taking the curses of past covenants upon Himself as He offered Himself as the sacrifice that would establish the New Covenant with Abraham's descendants and all mankind (Kline, *Kingdom Prologue,* page 296).

**Question:** In Genesis 15:8 Abram asked God: *How can I know that I shall possess it?*  In Genesis 15:18-21 God answered that question.  What was His answer?  
**Answer:** This covenant will have a human historical continuity and a cultural tradition that is to be transmitted from generation to generation.  Yahweh was telling Abram that He was establishing a relationship not just with an individual but with a nation.

**Question:** What was the extent of the land promised?  
**Answer:** From the River of Egypt to the Euphrates River, with dominion over all the people who lived between these two rivers.  This is covenant promise #1: the land.

It is uncertain which river of Egypt the text was referring to.  It cannot be the Nile.  It may be the Wadi el-Arish, a small river that divided Canaan from the Sinai which may have been bigger in Abram's time, but there is no way to determine what the geographic reference " the River of Egypt," was in this passage.  Details on the extent of Israel's boundaries are also given in [Numbers 34:1-15](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/numbers/numbers34.htm#v1); [Joshua 14:1- 21:45](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/joshua/joshua14.htm#v1); and [Ezekiel 47:13-21](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/ezekiel/ezekiel47.htm#v13).

The Abrahamic Covenant is the basis of all future covenants with Israel.  It is also the basis of the covenant with the "new Israel," the universal New Covenant of Jesus Christ, in which all the promises made to Abraham are fulfilled:

* The land is the entire earth over which Jesus Christ is King (the Kingdom of Heaven on earth'Christ's salvation-kingdom, the Church).
* The descendants are all who accept the gift of salvation.
* The world-wide blessing is the Gospel of salvation extended to all mankind; it is the path to the Promised Land of Heaven.

**Chapter 16: God's Plan Usurped**

**Please read Genesis 16:1-6: Sarai's Plan to Fulfill God's Plan  
16:1*Abram's wife Sarai had borne him no child, but she had an Egyptian slave-girl called Hagar.* 2*So Sarai said to Abram, 'Listen, now!  Since Yahweh has kept me from having children, go to my slave-girl.  Perhaps I shall get children through her.  And Abram took Sarai's advice.* 3*Thus, after Abram had lived in the land of Canaan for ten years, Sarai took Hagar her Egyptian slave-girl and gave her to Abram as his wife.* 4*He went to Hagar and she conceived.  And once she knew she had conceived, her mistress counted for nothing in her eyes.* 5*Then Sarai said to Abram, 'This outrage done to me is your fault!  It was I who put my slave-girl into your arms but, now she knows that she has conceived, I count for nothing in her eyes.  Yahweh judge between me and you!'* 6*'Very well,' Abram said to Sarai, 'your slave-girl is at your disposal.  Treat her as you think fit.'  Sarai accordingly treated her so badly that she ran away from her.***

Sarai's bareness, first mentioned in [Genesis 11:30](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis11.htm#v30), was now a crisis.  Sarai would be about 75 years old at this time and had probably gone through menopause ([Rom 4:19](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/romans/romans4.htm#v19); [Heb 11:11](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/hebrews/hebrews11.htm#v11)). She had given up on the possibility that she could have children.

**Question:** What was Sarai's solution to fulfilling God's promise that Abram was to have children of his own seed?  He had broached the question of adoption with Yahweh in [15:2-3](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis15.htm#v2) and God had once again assured him he would have children of his own.  
**Answer:** She decided to have children through her slave-girl.  The slave-son could become the heir so long as Sarai did not bear a son.

**Genesis 16:2b-3:** 2b*And Abram took Sarai's advice.* 3*Thus, after Abram had lived in the land of Canaan for ten years, Sarai took Hagar her Egyptian slave-girl and gave her to Abram as his wife.*

The literal translation is "as his woman."  There is a great distinction between "a woman" and "wife."  In ancient times, as today, a wife was bound by a marriage covenant which gave her certain rights.   Hagar was not a "wife" but a slave who was providing a service to her mistress' husband.  It was a common practice for barren women and their husbands to adopt the children of the husband born from a slave.  Also notice that Hagar is never mentioned as Abram's slave or his concubine, or wife (in Hebrew she became Abram's "woman").  In the biblical text she is always described as Sarai's property, even by the angel who confronted Hagar in [Genesis 16:8](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis16.htm#v8): *He said, 'Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai ..*.*'*

**Question:** Hagar became pregnant, but unfortunately Hagar's lack of respect for Sarai's authority caused Sarai to regret her plan.  Who did she blame and to whom did she appeal her claim of abuse?    
**Answer:** Sarai blamed her husband.  She appealed to her husband to protect her rights and to act as judge in the matter but she threatened to appeal to a higher authority if he refused to take action.  She called upon God as the supreme judge (see other examples in [31:53](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis31.htm#v53); [Ex 5:21](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/exodus/exodus5.htm#v21); [1 Sam 24:12](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/1samuel/1samuel24.htm#v12), [15](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/1samuel/1samuel24.htm#v15)).

Sarai bitterly complained to Abram about Hagar's lack of respect for her mistress, Abram acknowledged that the girl was Sarai's property to do with as she will.  The social laws in effect for cultures at this time protected a senior wife from such conflicts. The Code of Hammurabi read: *If later that female slave has claimed equality with her mistress because she bore children, her mistress may not sell her; she may mark her with the slave-mark and count her among the slaves* (*Ancient Near Eastern Texts,* page 172).

**Question:** What was Hagar's reaction to Sarai's "correction"?  
**Answer:** She ran away.

**Question:** What comparisons can be made to another wife offering her husband that which was not according to God's plan?  God had already announced in [Genesis 2:24](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis2.htm#v24) that marriage was to be between one man and one woman who became one flesh.  Compare [Genesis 16:2-3](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis16.htm#v2) with [Genesis 3:2-6](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis3.htm#v2).  
**Answer:** Sarai likeEve offered her husband what looked like a good plan to her.  Abram like Adam also accepted without protest.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Eve in [Genesis 3:2-17](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis3.htm#v2) | Sarai in [Genesis 6:2-5](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis6.htm#v2) |
| *The woman answered* ([Gen 3:2](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis3.htm#v2)) | *So Sarai said to Abram* ([Gen 16:2a](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis16.htm#v2)) |
| *you listened to the voice of your wife* ([Gen 3:17](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis3.htm#v17)) | *Listen, now* ([Gen 16:2](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis16.htm#v2)b) |
| *she took some*  ([Gen 3:6a](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis3.htm#v6)) | *Sarai took Hagar her Egyptian  slave-girl* ([Gen 16:3a](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis16.htm#v3)) |
| *she also gave some to her husband* ([Gen 3:6](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis3.htm#v6)b) | *and gave her to Abram*  ([Gen 16:3](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis16.htm#v3)b) |
| *It was the woman you put with me.... The snake tempted me*([Gen 3:12-13](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis3.htm#v12)) | *This outrage done to me is your fault* ([Gen 16:5](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis16.htm#v5)) |

**Please read Genesis 16:7-16: Hagar's Rebellion and the Birth of Ishmael  
16:7*The angel of the Lord found her by a spring in the desert, the spring on the road to Shur.* 8*He said, 'Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going? 'I am running away from my mistress Sarai,' she replied.* 9*The angel of Yahweh said to her, 'Go back to your mistress and submit to her.'* 10*The angle of Yahweh further said to her, 'I shall make your descendants too numerous to be counted.'* 11*Then the angel of Yahweh said to her: 'Now, you have conceived and will bear a son, and you shall name him Ishmael, for Yahweh has heard your cries of distress.* 12*A wild donkey of a man he will be, his hand against every man, and every man's hand against him, living his life in defiance of all his kinsmen.'* 13*Hagar gave a name to Yahweh who had spoken to her, 'You are El Roi, by which she meant, 'Did I not go on seeing here, after him who sees me?'* 14*This is why the well is called the well of Lahai Roi; it is between Kadesh and Bered.* 15*Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave his son borne by Hagar the name Ishmael.* 16*Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.***

The Angel of the Yahweh found Hagar on the road to Shur; it was the road to Egypt.  Hagar was attempting to return to her homeland.  The word translated "angel," is from the Greek *angelos*, meaning "messenger" (*malak* in Hebrew).  An angel is a spiritual being sent from the heavenly court as God's personal messenger.  Prophets are also called God's messengers (i.e., [Haggai 1:13](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/haggai/haggai1.htm#v13); [Malachi 2:7](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/malachi/malachi2.htm#v7); [3:1](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/malachi/malachi3.htm#v1)).  God's messengers, whether spiritual or human, are treated as those who bear the authority of God.  The Angel of Yahweh is a mysterious figure in Sacred Scripture. Some associate the Angel of Yahweh with the Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity, active in God plan of salvation history prior to the Incarnation.   He is powerful and yet he is never identified as an Archangel ([1 Thes 4:16](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/1thessalonians/1thessalonians4.htm#v16); [Jude 9](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/jude/jude.htm#v9)). It is the Angel of Yahweh who greets Moses from the burning bush ([Ex 3:2](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis3.htm#v2)), he is responsible for leading the people of Israel to the Promised Land ([Ex 14:19](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/exodus/exodus14.htm#v19)), he directs prophets ([1 Kgs 19:7-8](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/1kings/1kings19.htm#v7); [2 Kgs 1:3](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/2kings/2kings1.htm#v3)), he delivers judgment against Israel's enemies (2 Kgs 19:35; [2 Chr 32:21-22](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/2chronicles/2chronicles32.htm#v21)), and against Israel and her kings when they fail ([1 Chr 21:16](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/1chronicles/1chronicles21.htm#v16)), and he protects the righteous ([Ps 34:7](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/psalms/psalm34.htm#v7); [35:5-6](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/psalms/psalm35.htm#v5)).

**Question:** How did the Angel of Yahweh treat Hagar?  What did he tell her?  
**Answer:** He did not blame Hagar for what had happened.  He confirmed that she was Sarai's slave and told her she must return and submit to her mistress.  However, he softened the command to return by prophesying the birth of her son, naming him, and divulging a glimpse into his future.

**Genesis 16:11-12:** *Then the angel of Yahweh said to her: 'Now, you have conceived and will bear a son, and you shall name him Ishmael, for Yahweh has heard your cries of distress.  A wild donkey of a man he will be, his hand against every man, and every man's hand against him, living his life in defiance of all his kinsmen.'*

Ishmael's name means "God hears."  God heard Hagar's cries of distress.  God hears the non-elect as well as the elect; His compassion and love is extended to all humanity.  But Hagar's deliverance lies in submitting to Abram's bride Sarai, she who is to be the mother of the Israel of the future (people of the Old Covenant Church), just as the salvation and deliverance of her descendants will be in submitting to the Bride of Christ, the new Israel of the New Covenant, which is the Church of Jesus, the promised Redeemer-Messiah.

**Question:** From the angel's description of Ishmael, what kind of man was he going to be?  
**Answer:** He will be fiercely independent like the wild desert donkey, refusing to conform to social convention.  His refusal to compromise will cause conflict with everyone who comes in contact with him.  His propensity for aggression is in contrast to the pastoral lifestyle of the line of the "promised seed" who are descendants of the Patriarchs.(3)

**Question:** What name did Hagar give to the Lord?  
**Answer:** She said are El Roi, "God who sees me" or "God of my seeing."

Hagar names the well where the Angel of Yahweh met her Lahai Roi, "belonging to the living one, my seeing one," continuing the word play with "seeing" and "who sees."  This encounter took place not far from the oasis of Kadesh, the caravan rendezvous on the trade route mentioned in [Genesis 14:7](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis14.htm#v7).

**Chapter 17: The Abrahamic Covenant Part II**

*Refuse faithful love to your neighbor and you forsake the fear of Shaddai.* [Job 6:14](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/job/job6.htm#v14)

**Please read Genesis 17:1-8: The Covenant Part II and Abram Becomes Abraham  
17:1*When Abram was ninety-nine years old Yahweh appeared to him and said, 'Iam El Shaddai.  Live in my presence, be perfect,* 2*and I shall grant a covenant between myself and you, and make you very numerous.'* 3*And Abram bowed to the ground.* 4*God spoke to him as follows, 'For my part, this is my covenant with you: you will become the father of many nations.* 5*And you are no longer to be called Abram; your name is to be Abraham, for I am making you father of many nations.* 6*I shall make you exceedingly fertile.  I shall make you into nations, and your issue will be kings.* 7*And I shall maintain my covenant between myself and you, and your descendants after you, generation after generation, as a covenant in perpetuity, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.* 8*And to you and to your descendants after you, I shall give the country where you are now immigrants, the entire land of Canaan, to own in perpetuity.  And I will be their God.'***

Chapter 17 can be divided into five parts:

1. God's appearance and first speech to Abraham (17:1-14)
2. The conclusion of God's speech to Abraham (17:15-16)
3. Abraham's response to God (17:17-18)
4. God's second speech: His reply to Abraham (17:19-22)
5. The conclusion (17:23-27)

**Genesis 17:1:** *When Abram was ninety-nine years old Yahweh appeared to him and said, 'I am El Shaddai.  Live in my presence, be perfect [*or *walk in my presence and be blameless].*

**Question:** How many years have passed since the birth of Ishmael?  See [Genesis 16:16](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis16.htm#v16); [17:25](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis17.htm#v25).  
**Answer:** Thirteen years.

For the first time Yahweh gave Abram His title'El Shaddai (*el sadday*).  It was the only title/name by which the Patriarchs knew God ([Gen 17:1](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis17.htm#v1); [28:3](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis28.htm#v3); [35:11](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis35.htm#v11); [43:14](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis43.htm#v14); [48:3](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis48.htm#v3); [49:25](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis49.htm#v25); [Ex 6:3](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/exodus/exodus6.htm#v3)).   The prophet Balaam addressed the Lord as Shaddai ([Num 24:4](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/numbers/numbers24.htm#v4), [16](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/numbers/numbers24.htm#v16)), Job knew God by the same title (i.e., [Job 5:17](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/job/job5.htm#v17); [16:4](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/job/job16.htm#v4), [14](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/job/job16.htm#v14); etc., 31 times), as did Naomi in the Book of Ruth ([Rt 1:20-21](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/ruth/ruth1.htm" \l "v20)).  The title Shaddai is also found in [Psalm 68:14](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/psalms/psalm68.htm#v14); [91:1](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/psalms/psalm91.htm#v1); [Isaiah 13:6](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/isaiah/isaiah13.htm#v6); [Ez 1:24](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/ezekiel/ezekiel1.htm#v24); [10:5](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/ezekiel/ezekiel10.htm#v5) and [Joel 1:15](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/joel/joel1.htm#v15).  The literal meaning of El Shaddai is disputed.  Most Bible translations render this Hebrew word as "God Almighty," from St. Jerome's translation in the Vulgate, *deus omnipotens*, while the Septuagint translated the title as *kyrois pantokrator,* ([Job 15:25](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/job/job15.htm#v25)).  Modern scholars, like the ancient translators, have not reached a consensus on the original meaning.  Modern scholars easily identify *el* as the Hebrew for "god," but there is less agreement on the meaning of *sadday.* The Hebrew root *sdd* may be referring to "the Powerful, Strong One," *se* and *day* as "The One Who Suffices" (Waltke, pages 258-59).  The concept seems to be "He who can accomplish anything without limits."

**Question:** After revealing His name/title what command did God give Abram?  Who else exhibited the same degree of righteousness that God now demands of Abram?  See [Genesis 6:9](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis6.htm#v9).  
**Answer:** *Live in my presence, be perfect...*or *walk in my presence and be blameless.* Noah.

The same Hebrew word, *tamin,* translated "perfect" or "blameless" is found in the description of Noah ([Gen 6:9](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis6.htm#v9)), in God's command to Abraham ([Gen 17:1](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis17.htm#v1)), and in God's command to the children of Israel: *You must be faultless [blameless/perfect] in your relationship with Yahweh your God* ([Dt 18:13](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/deuteronomy/deuteronomy18.htm" \l "v13)).   It is the same command Jesus will give to His Apostles in [Matthew 4:48](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/matthew/matthew4.htm#v48): *"be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect"* (New American Bible).   In the Gospels the Greek word, *teleios* (perfect)*,* occurs only 3 times; twice in [Matthew 5:48](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/matthew/matthew5.htm#v48) and a third time in [Matthew 19:21](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/matthew/matthew19.htm#v21) where Jesus tells the rich young ruler to go and sell what he has and give it to the poor if he wants to be "perfect" (*Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon,* page 1071; *Thayer Greek-English Lexicon,* page 618).

**Question:** How does one live in perfection?  Hint: how is "perfection" defined in [Psalm 19:7](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/psalms/psalm19.htm#v7)?  
**Answer:** The law of Yahweh is perfect.  To be "perfect" as God is perfect is to live in obedience according to the commands of God (see [Ex 20:3-17](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/exodus/exodus20.htm#v3); [Dt 4:15-20](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/deuteronomy/deuteronomy4.htm#v15); [Mt 5:1-7:27](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/matthew/matthew5.htm#v1); [19:16-22](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/matthew/matthew19.htm#v16)), to diligently seek to avoid sinning against God by disobeying His commands, and to avoid sinning against brothers and sisters in the human family: living in fellowship with God and man.

In [Romans 13:8-10](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/romans/romans13.htm#v8) St. Paul spoke of how "love," as defined by Christ, has fulfilled the law of the Old Covenant. In that passage Paul wrote: *for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law,* and *Love does no evil to the neighbor; hence, love is the fulfillment of the law.* Jesus taught that to live the law of love of God and love of neighbor is to be "perfect" as God is perfect ([Mt 5:43](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/matthew/matthew5.htm#v43); [19:19](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/matthew/matthew19.htm#v19); [22:37-39](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/matthew/matthew22.htm#v37)).  A holy God deserves holy children, and in this case, God has also determined that a holy people needed a holy human father.

**Genesis 17:2:** *and I shall grant a covenant between myself and you, and make you very numerous.* Although Abram is commanded to fellowship with God by living a righteous life, the covenant God makes with him is an entirely free gift.  This is the second part of the three-part covenant God established with Abraham and his descendants, ratified in the covenant ceremony and oath swearing in [Genesis 15](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis15.htm).  This part of the covenant has three divisions:

1. *As for me* ([Gen 17:4-8](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis17.htm#v4))
2. *As for you* ([Gen 17:9-14](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis17.htm#v9))
3. *As for Sarah* ([Gen 17:15-16](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis17.htm#v15))

**Genesis 17:4:** *God spoke to him as follows, 'For my part, this is my covenant with you: you will become the father of many nations.*

Just as when God promised a covenant to Noah in [Genesis 6:17-21](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis6.htm#v17), God defined His part in fulfilling the covenant promises and Abram's part:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| God's part in [Genesis 6](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis7.htm#v17) | God's part in [Genesis 17](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis17.htm#v4) |
| *For my part I am going to send the flood, the waters, on earth, to destroy all living things...  But with you I shall establish my covenant...* ([Gen 6:17-18a](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis6.htm#v17)) | *For my part, this is my covenant with you: you will become the father of many nations*([Gen 17:4](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis17.htm" \l "v4)). |
| Noah's part in [Genesis 6](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis6.htm#v17) | Abraham's part in [Genesis 17](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis17.htm#v9) |
| *...and you will go aboard the ark... from all living things, you must take two (pairs) of each kind... they must be male and female.[..].  For your part, provide yourself with eatables of all kinds...Noah did this; exactly as God commanded*  ([Gen 6:18b-21](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis6.htm#v18)). | *You for your part must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you.... You must circumcise the flesh of your foreskin ... every one of your males, generation after generation... [..]. ..all the men of his household...were circumcised with him* ([Gen 17:9-27](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis17.htm#v9)) |

**Question:** How does God innumerate the conditions He promises to fulfill in His covenant with Abraham?  
**Answer:** This section of the Abrahamic covenant is expressed in seven parts ([Gen 17:4-8](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis17.htm#v4)):

1. Abram will become the father of many nations.
2. His new name will be Abraham.
3. Abraham will be exceedingly fertile
4. Nations will descend from his line
5. His descendants will be kings
6. This is a perpetual covenant to include Abraham's descendants
7. The entire land of Canaan will belong to Abraham and his descendants

**Please read Genesis 17:9-14: Circumcision the Covenant Sign  
17:9*God further said to Abraham, 'You for your part must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you, generation after generation.* 10*This is my covenant which you must keep between myself and you, and your descendants after you: every one of your males must be circumcised.* 11*You must circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that will be the sign of the covenant between myself and you.* 12*As soon as he is eight days old, every one of your males, generation after generation, must be circumcised, including slaves born within the household or bought from a foreigner not of your descent.* 13*Whether born within the household or bought, they must be circumcised.  My covenant must be marked in your flesh as a covenant in perpetuity.* 14*The uncircumcised male, whose foreskin has not been circumcised'that person must be cut off form his people: he has broken my covenant.***

**Question:** How does God innumerate Abraham's obligations to the covenant?  
**Answer:** Seven aspects of covenant obligation are listed (Gen 17:9-14):

1. Abraham and his descendants must keep the covenant.
2. Every male must be circumcised.
3. Circumcision is to be the covenant sign.
4. All males are to be circumcised when they are eight days old.
5. Sons and slaves must be circumcised.
6. The covenant must be marked in the flesh of your people as a perpetual covenant.
7. Any male who is not circumcised is to be excommunicated from the covenant because he has broken the covenant in the failure to be circumcised.

**Question:** Why did God require circumcision as a condition of the covenant?  
**Answer:**

1. It was a blood sacrifice that was a sign of obedience to God in all matters.
2. It was a physical sign of belonging to a covenant people.
3. Symbolically circumcision also represented the "cutting off" of the sinful old life.

Circumcision was an external sign that represented an internal condition.The Prophet Jeremiah wrote: *Look, the days are coming, Yahweh declares, when I shall punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh: Egypt, Judah, Edom, the Ammonites, Moab, and all the men with shaven temples who live in the desert.  For all those nations and the whole house of Israel too, are uncircumcised at heart* ([Jer 9:24- 25](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/jeremiah/jeremiah9.htm" \l "v24))*.* To be "circumcised of heart" was to be obedient to Yahweh ([Lev 26:41](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/leviticus/leviticus26.htm#v41); [Dt 10:16](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/deuteronomy/deuteronomy10.htm#v16); [Jer 4:4](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/jeremiah/jeremiah4.htm#v4)).  Foreigners who were both uncircumcised of heart and flesh could not be admitted to the Israelite Temple ([Ez 44:7](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/ezekiel/ezekiel44.htm" \l "v7); also see [Dt 30: 1-2](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/deuteronomy/deuteronomy30.htm#v1), [6](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/deuteronomy/deuteronomy30.htm#v6); [Rom 2:25](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/romans/romans2.htm#v25); [Lev 26:41](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/leviticus/leviticus26.htm#v41); [Col 2:9-13](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/colossians/colossians2.htm#v9); [Phil 3:3](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/philippians/philippians3.htm#v3); [1Cor 7:18-19](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/1corinthians/1corinthians7.htm#v18)).

From this time forward, in the covenant community infants were brought into the covenant with Yahweh through circumcision on the 8th day of their lives (today medical science has discovered that an infant's blood does not clot properly until after an infant is 7 days old).   The designation for circumcision on the 8th day is significant.  Eight people were saved in the ark from the great flood. In Scripture eight is the number of salvation, regeneration and redemption.  It will be on the 8th day, the day after the 7th day Sabbath, that the Redeemer-Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, will be raised from the dead.

**Please read Genesis 17:15-27: Sarai Becomes Sarah: the Mother of Kings  
17:15*Furthermore God said to Abraham, 'As regards your wife Sarai, you must not call her Sarai, but Sarah.* 16*I shall bless her and moreover give you a son by her.  I shall bless her and she will become nations: kings of peoples will issue from her.* 17*Abram bowed to the ground, and he laughed, thinking to himself, 'Is a child to be born to a man one hundred years old, and will Sarah have a child at the age of ninety?'* 18*Abraham said to God, 'May Ishmael live in your presence!  That will be enough!* 19*But God replied, 'Yes, your wife Sarah will bear you a son whom you must name Isaac.  And I shall maintain my covenant with him, a covenant in perpetuity, to be his God and the God of his descendants after him.* 20*For Ishmael too I grant you your request.  I hereby bless him and will make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous.  He will be the father of twelve princes, and I shall make him into a great nation.* 21*But my covenant I shall maintain with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear you at this time next year.'* 22*When he had finished speaking to Abraham, God went up from him.* 23*Then Abraham took his son Ishmael, all the slaves born in his household or whom he had bought, in short all the males among the people of Abram's household, and circumcised their foreskins that same day, as God said to him.* 24*Abraham was ninety-nine years old when his foreskin was circumcised.* 25*Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when his foreskin was circumcised.* 26*Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised on the very same day,* 27*and all the men of his household, those born in the household and those bought from foreigners, were circumcised with him.***

This section marks the third division of the covenant obligations.

**Question:** As a sign of the change in Abram and Sarai's faith journey, God gave each of them new names.  What are their new names and what do their names mean?  
**Answer:** God changed Abram's name to Abraham: from "exalted father" to "father of a multitude," and He also changed Sarai's name to Sarah'from "my princess" (Abram's princess) to "princess" or "queen."  Sarah is to be the mother of kings ([Gen 17:16](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis17.htm#v16)).

Abram's name was composed of the Hebrew words *'ab* (father) and *ram* (to be high), and meant "exalted father."  His new name is *'ab* (father) and *ham* (from *hamon =* "crowd"), a name which [Genesis 17:4-5](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis17.htm#v4) describes as meaning "father of many nations" or "father of a multitude."  A name change in Scripture reflects a change in destiny.  In Hebrew Abram's name change to Abraham and Sarai's name change to Sarah is effected by the addition of a single letter, the letter "hey."  Ancient cultures did not have a separate system for letters and numbers; every letter of the alphabet had a numerical value.  In Hebrew the letter "hey" represented the number five.  In Hebrew, each number also had a symbolic value.  The value of the number five was power and grace.  God added His grace to Abram, the "exulted father" and Sarai, Abram's "my princess," and transformed them into Abraham, the "father of a multitude," and Sarah the mother of the future Kings of Israel. Her name reflects her promised status, not just as Abraham's queen or princess but as the mother of kings of future generations.  Sarai/Sarah is the only woman in salvation history whose name was changed by God and whose death was recorded in detail ([Gen 23:1-2](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis23.htm#v1), [19](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis23.htm#v19)).

**Question:** What double blessing did God pronounced over Sarah?  
**Answer:** She will bear a son and she is to be the mother of nations and kings.

**Genesis 17:17:** *Abram bowed to the ground, and he laughed, thinking to himself, 'Is a child to be born to a man one hundred years old, and will Sarah have a child at the age of ninety?'*

This is the second time Abram has bowed down to Yahweh in adoration ([Gen 17:3](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis17.htm#v3), [17](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis17.htm#v17); also see [Lev 9:24](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/leviticus/leviticus9.htm#v24); [Josh 5:14](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/joshua/joshua5.htm#v14); [Ez 1:28](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/ezekiel/ezekiel1.htm#v28)). "Laughter" will become a repeated theme in the next three chapters.  Look for the repetition of this word.  In this verse, Abraham laughs in amazement at the impossibility of what God has revealed to him, and yet what should have been joy is marred by a single concern.

**Genesis 17:18:** *Abraham said to God, 'May Ishmael live in your presence!  That will be enough!*

**Question:** What was Abraham's concern that marred the news of God's promise of Sarah giving birth?  
**Answer:** Abraham loved Ishmael and was concerned for his future.

**Question:** This is only the third time Abraham has dared to speak to God.  What was Abraham's petition?  
**Answer:** He was willing to forego God's promise concerning a son from Sarah if God will bless Ishmael.

Abraham's petition is heart wrenching.   He has a son who he loves and he wants the best that God can promise for this son.  How could any of us choose between our children much less between a child we love and one who is not yet born?

**Genesis 17:19a:** *But God replied, 'Yes, your wife Sarah will bear you a son whom you must name Isaac.*

**Question:** What was God's response to Abraham's petition?  
**Answer:** The reply was probably what Abraham did not want to hear.  God answered that Abraham will have a son and he is to name the child Isaac.  His name means "he laughs," a name that is a word play on Abraham's reaction to the news of this sons' birth'a reaction that will be repeated by Sarah ([Gen 18:12](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis18.htm#v12); [21:6](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis21.htm#v6)).

**Genesis 17:19b:** *And I shall maintain my covenant with him, a covenant in perpetuity, to be his God and the God of his descendants after him.* The word to "maintain" Abraham's covenant with Isaac is the same Hebrew word used in the covenant formation with Noah in [Genesis 6:18](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis6.htm#v18); [9:9](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis9.htm#v9), [11](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis9.htm#v11).  Just as Noah's covenant was a continuation of Adam's covenant, so is Isaac's covenant with Yahweh a continuation of the covenant formed with Abraham (*Interlineal Hebrew-English Bible,* pages 15 and 37; *Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon,* pages 879).

**Genesis 17:20-21:** 20*For Ishmael too I grant you your request.  I hereby bless him and will make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous.  He will be the father of twelve princes, and I shall make him into a great nation.* 21*But my covenant I shall maintain with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear you at this time next year.'*

**Question:** God, in his generosity also blessed Ishmael.  What was Ishmael's blessing?  
**Answer:** He will be the father of a nation with numerous descendants.

**Question:** What difference has God clearly established between Abraham's two sons?  
**Answer:** It is Isaac who is to be the heir, the bearer of the "promised seed," and the one to carry on God's covenant relationship.  Once again there is a dispossessed firstborn son and the elevation of a younger brother.

**Genesis 17:22-27:** 22*When he had finished speaking to Abraham, God went up from him.* 23*Then Abraham took his son Ishmael, all the slaves born in his household or whom he had bought, in short all the males among the people of Abram's household, and circumcised their foreskins that same day, as God said to him.* 24*Abraham was ninety-nine years old when his foreskin was circumcised.* 25*Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when his foreskin was circumcised.* 26*Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised on the very same day,* 27*and all the men of his household, those born in the household and those bought from foreigners, were circumcised with him.*

**Question:** What was Abraham's response to God's final speech?  
**Answer:** Abraham accepted God's decision concerning the future of both Ishmael and Isaac, and he immediately began carrying out his covenant obligation to circumcise the males of his household.

**Question:** How much younger was Sarah than Abraham?  
**Answer:** She was ten years younger.  At this time Abraham was ninety-nine years old and Sarah was eighty-nine.  When Isaac was born, Sarah was ninety and Abraham was one hundred.

**Questions for group discussion:**

**Question:** Today, in the New Covenant, God does not define His people by their physical descent from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. How is the New Covenant believer defined?  
**Answer:** God's covenant relationship with His people is defined through Jesus Christ, the only descendant of Abraham who kept God's covenants perfectly, without transgression.

The old rite of circumcision symbolized the cutting off of the old life and the beginning a new life in covenant with Yahweh.  It was an outward sign that signified an interior condition.  Today, God administers His New Covenant by granting His people the third Person of the Most Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit who writes the Law of the New Covenant on believer's hearts, guaranteeing their spiritual circumcision ([Jer 31:31-34](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/jeremiah/jeremiah31.htm" \l "v31); [Rom 2:28-29](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/romans/romans2.htm#v28); [2 Cor 3:2-6](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/2corinthians/2corinthians3.htm#v2); [Gal 6:15](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/galatians/galatians6.htm#v15)).  In the New Covenant, circumcision, the old sign of covenant rebirth, has been replaced by a new sign that effects what it symbolizes.

**Question:** What outward sign symbolizes the "new life" for Christians and entrance into the covenant family?  Why is it appropriate that this sign be given to babies as well as to adults?  
**Answer:** The sign is the Sacrament of Baptism by water and the Spirit; it is the covenant rite by which one enters into the New Covenant with Yahweh.The male descendants of Abraham, including Jesus, entered the old covenant as babies under the sign of circumcision ([Lk 2:21](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/luke/luke2.htm" \l "v21)).  The Jews who became the New Covenant children of God would have also expected their children to enter the covenant as babies'experiencing new life as sons and daughters of God through the Sacrament of Baptism.  The Church has always baptized infants.  In Acts whole families were baptized, which would have included children ([Acts 10:11-18](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/acts/acts10.htm#v11); [16:15](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/acts/acts16.htm#v15), [33](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/acts/acts16.htm#v33); [18:8](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/acts/acts18.htm#v8); [1 Cor 1:16](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/1corinthians/1corintians1.htm#v16)).  See CCC [1231](http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p2s2c1a1.htm#1231), [1250-52](http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p2s2c1a1.htm#1250), [1282](http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p2s2c1a1.htm#1282).

**Question:** Abram was an imperfect man.  His questioning of God in chapter 15 reflected his lack of trust in God's plan.  Why would God choose such a man as the father of the line of the "promised seed"?  What is the lesson for us?  
**Answer:** The answer is that God can take perfectly ordinary, imperfect men and women and if they will trust Him enough to yield their lives to Him, He can used them in extraordinary ways.  We don't need perfect faith; we just need faith enough to trust and be obedient to God's call.

God judges the wickedness of all people, even those in covenant with Him.  In the 6th century BC God judged the wickedness of the Kingdom of Judah: *Furthermore, all the leaders of Judah, the priests and the people too, added infidelity to infidelity, copying all the shameful practices of the nations and defiling the Temple of Yahweh which he himself had consecrated in Jerusalem.  Yahweh, God of their ancestors, continuously sent them word through his messengers because he felt sorry for his people and his dwelling, but they ridiculed the messengers of God, they despised his words, they laughed at his prophets, until Yahweh's wrath with his people became so fierce that there was no further remedy* ([2 Chr 36:14-16](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/2chronicles/2chronicles36.htm#v14)).

**Question:** What is the condition of Christians in the United States today?  Are Catholics and non-Catholic Christians living in obedience to the laws of God or are they "copying all the shameful practices" of non-believers?  Discuss the ways our society has departed from the teachings of God, indulged in the practice of sins, and tolerance toward acts of violence against innocent life and unrighteousness behavior toward God.   Will Americans and the Church face judgment when the iniquities become so fierce that there is no further remedy?

**Endnotes:**

[1](http://www.agapebiblestudy.com/genesis/Lesson_9.htm" \l "note1). In Scripture the phrase "don't be afraid" is sometimes spoken by divine beings (angels) when they suddenly appear visually to humans, as in the angel Gabriel's appearance to the priest Zechariah and to the Virgin Mary ([Lk 1:13](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/luke/luke1.htm" \l "v13), [31](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/luke/luke1.htm#v31)).  However, in this case it is the "word of Yahweh" that comes to Abram in a vision, and there is no evidence that there was a physical manifestation.  Abram has received a message from Yahweh in the past so he is familiar with God speaking to him.  It is more likely that the inspired writer is using the message of reassurance in the same way Yahweh, through His prophets, boosted the courage of the people of Israel when facing enemies, for example in [Exodus 14:13-14](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/exodus/exodus14.htm#v13): *Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid!  Stand firm, and you will see what Yahweh will do to rescue you today; the Egyptians you see today you will never see again.  Yahweh will do the fighting for you; all you need to do is to keep calm.'* (also see [Dt 20:3](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/deuteronomy/deuteronomy20.htm#v3); [Josh 8:1](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/joshua/joshua8.htm#v1); [10:8](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/joshua/joshua10.htm#v8), [25](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/joshua/joshua10.htm#v25); [11:6](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/joshua/joshua11.htm#v6); [Jdgs 7:3](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/judges/judges7.htm#v3); [1 Sam 23:16-17](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/1samuel/1samuel23.htm#v16); [30:6](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/1samuel/1samuel30.htm#v6)).  Some scholars, however, believe Abram's fear concerns his lack of an heir, which he does mention in the next verse.

[2](http://www.agapebiblestudy.com/genesis/Lesson_9.htm" \l "note2). Vassal: *vas'al, n. [Fr. vassal, L.L. vassallus*, *a servant].  Of same origin as valet, varlet.  A feudal tenant holding lands under a lord and bound my his tenure to feudal services; a subject; a dependent; a retainer; a servant; a bondman; a slave* (*New Webster Dictionary, International edition,* Grolier, New York, 1969, page 929).

[3](http://www.agapebiblestudy.com/genesis/Lesson_9.htm" \l "note3). The *Koran,* the holy book of Islam, presents Ishmael as a prophet (*Koran*, 19:54), as Abraham's heir (*Koran* 2:122-27) and the physical father of all Muslim Arabs.  In Arab culture the firstborn son, whether of the legal wife or a concubine, is considered to be the legitimate heir.  The word "Islam" means to "submit" (*Koran* 2:127, 131; 3:19; 19:88).  It is interesting that in [Genesis 16:9](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis16.htm#v9) the Angel of Yahweh doesn't tell Hagar to submit to God, he tells her to submit to Sarai.  Islam denies that Jesus is the Son of God (*Koran* 19:88); see [1 Jn 2:22-28](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/1john/1john2.htm#v22).

[4](http://www.agapebiblestudy.com/genesis/Lesson_9.htm" \l "note4). Circumcision has a long history in the ancient Near East. The practice of circumcision can be traced back as early as the 23rd century BC to Egypt.   Western Semitic tribes, which include the Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites, Arameans and some Canaanite and Phoenician tribes, practiced circumcision. There is no evidence that the Eastern Semitic peoples of Mesopotamia such as the Akkadians, Assyrians and Babylonians were circumcised.  The Biblical Hivites living in Canaan did not practice circumcision ([Gen 34:14](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis34.htm#v14)), and most, but not all, of the Sea Peoples, including the Philistines, were uncircumcised.  In all the cases of ancient peoples who became neighbors of the descendants of Abraham, the practice of circumcision became a rite of passage into manhood at about age 13 or a preparation for marriage ([Gen 34:9-25](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis34.htm#v9)).  However, the rite of infant circumcision was unique to the Israelites ([Gen 17:12](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/genesis/genesis17.htm#v12); [Lev 12:3](http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/leviticus/leviticus12.htm#v3)) and was not practiced by other cultures in the ancient Near East.