

him as righteousness', which forms the climax of the episode, has rightly been seen as one of the most significant in the whole of Scripture (see Gal 3:7-9; Jas 2:23; cf. Heb 11:8-10) and has been taken, together with other instances of Abraham's faith, particularly his readiness to leave Haran and his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac (ch. 22) as the foundation of the doctrine of justification by faith, even though its precise meaning has been disputed. That it is an expression of Abraham's readiness to trust God's promise cannot be doubted.

vv. 7-21, like 1-6, are probably a creation of the author with no older tradition behind it. They are also concerned with the promise, but now specifically with the promise of the land rather than with the question of progeny. Like vv. 1-6, they present Abraham as hesitant to believe the promise and demanding to know how it is to be fulfilled. YHWH satisfies him by means of a solemn but curious ritual which Abraham is commanded to carry out. This ritual does not conform precisely with anything known from elsewhere, although the cutting of the animals into two is reminiscent of some covenant rituals. The animals specified are those used in sacrifice in the laws of the OT; but the purpose of the ritual is indicated by the solemn oath-like statement to Abraham by YHWH in vv. 13-16 and his making of a covenant with him (vv. 18-21). Its awesome accompaniments—the 'deep sleep' (*tardēmā*, a rare word also used of Adam when Eve was created) and the terrifying darkness—add to the solemnity of the event. The smoking fire pot and the flaming torch (v. 17) represent YHWH's passing between the rows of animals to symbolize his binding himself to keep the covenant. vv. 13-16 are a 'prophecy after the event' foretelling the captivity in Egypt and the Exodus; its purpose is to account for the long gap between promise and fulfilment. The 400 years of v. 13 and the 'fourth generation' of v. 16 can hardly be reconciled; it has been suggested that v. 16, which foreshadows the Israelites' conquest of the Amorites (Canaanites), is a later revision of the prophecy. The Amorites are said not to be sufficiently wicked as yet to deserve this fate. The promise of vv. 18-21, which contains a comprehensive list of the peoples believed to have preceded Israel in the land, describes the boundaries of the land in very grand terms—from the borders of Egypt to the Euphrates. In fact the borders of the state of Israel were probably never as extensive (1 Kings 4:21 is hardly a sober historical statement). The covenant with Abraham (v. 18), who here represents the future nation of Israel, is a free, unconditional promise, unlike the covenant of Sinai.

(16:1-16) Like the stories in chs. 12, 20, and 26 (see above on 12:10-20), the story of Hagar in this chapter has a counterpart (21:9-21). These are clearly variants of an older folk-tale; and once again their placement in the ongoing story of Abraham is significant. Both are further examples of the threat to the fulfilment of the promise that Abraham will have a legitimate heir by his wife Sarah and of the setting aside of that threat (cf. 15:2-4). Ch. 16 immediately precedes the repetition of the promise guaranteeing Abraham's progeny and their destiny (17:1-8); 21:9-21 immediately follows the birth of Isaac (21:1-8) and confirms that it is he who is to be the heir. But the motif of God's protection of the rejected Ishmael which is common

to both versions of the story is an indication that before the story was inserted into the Abraham narrative and placed in its two respective positions it was the figure of Hagar who was the centre of interest and the principal character. There is a somewhat similar story of acrimonious relations between a barren wife and her rival in 1 Sam 1:2-8.

The practice alluded to in vv. 2-3 was a common and accepted one in the ancient Near East; it is consequently not possible to fix the date of the story by reference to any particular extant Near-Eastern law or legal contract as has been proposed by some scholars. The words of the 'angel' (*mal'āk*) of YHWH who speaks to Hagar in 16:7 are identified with the words of YHWH himself in 16:13. Westermann's comment (1985:244) is apt: 'God is present not in the messenger, but in the message.' The promise that YHWH makes to Hagar in v. 10, which is curiously like that made elsewhere about Isaac, identifies Ishmael as the ancestor of the Ishmaelites, whose supposed characteristics are described in v. 12. There are two aetiologies in the later part of the narrative, but they are subordinate to the main theme of the story. First, the name Ishmael, who is to be preserved by YHWH's intervention (v. 11), means 'God hears'. In the second aetiology the name El-rei (*'ēl rō'ī*) (v. 13, probably 'God who sees me'), is stated in v. 14 to be the origin of the name of the—now unidentifiable—well where the angel spoke to Hagar. The aetiology, like others in Genesis, is not exact, as it is Hagar who 'sees' God, and not vice versa.

(17:1-27) This chapter is primarily concerned with the covenant (*bērit*) which God undertakes to make with Abraham—the word *bērit* occurs 13 times in the chapter. It reiterates the promises of progeny, of future greatness for Abraham's descendants, and of the gift of the land; but it contains several new and significant features. In v. 1 YHWH introduces himself as El Shaddai ('God Almighty'): the author supposes that at this time Abraham did not know YHWH by name. The name Shaddai, the meaning of which is uncertain (it may mean 'the one of the mountain' or 'the one of the field') was probably used as a divine epithet from an early period. This incident is regarded as opening a new stage in the life of Abraham: this is why he now receives a new name (v. 5). (So also with Sarah, v. 15.) Abraham is to be the father of not one but many nations, including that of the Ishmaelites; but the covenant is clearly for Israel alone, and will be for ever. It is to Israel that the land of Canaan is to be given 'for a perpetual holding' (v. 8) and YHWH will be their God. But the covenant is now to be two-sided: Abraham and his descendants must keep it by obeying God's command to practise circumcision, a rite not practised by the peoples of Mesopotamia from which Abraham has come. There is now for the first time in the Abraham story a warning against the breach of the covenant, which will entail exclusion from its privileges and from the new special relationship with God; this could be a warning to Jews of the immediate post-exilic community who were tempted to abandon their Jewish identity. The concept of the crucial importance of circumcision was a particular characteristic of the post-exilic period.

Two further additional features of the chapter are the personal promise to Sarah (vv. 15-19) with the precise announcement of the time when her son will be born (v. 21) and the

blessing of Ishmael (v. 20). Abraham's sceptical laughter at the announcement that Sarah will give birth combined with his deep obeisance (cf. Sarah's laughter on a parallel occasion, 18:12) is strange; but there is here a play on the name Isaac (*yishāq*, that is, 'he laughs', possibly an abbreviated form of *yishāq-ʾēl*, 'God laughs'). Abraham's wish that Ishmael should be preserved under God's protection (v. 18) shows that he still places his hopes in Ishmael. God grants his wish, conferring a special blessing on Ishmael, but excludes him from the covenant that is for Isaac and his descendants. The chapter concludes with a notice that Abraham duly carried out God's commands about circumcision, which was performed on all Abraham's household (including Ishmael) as prescribed in later legislation (Ex 12:48).

(18:1-16) The motif of the appearance to human beings of gods in human disguise is a common mythological theme of the ancient world. A Greek myth, preserved by the Roman poet Ovid, tells of such a visit in which a miraculous birth is announced; there is a similar story in Judg 6:11-24. Gen 18:1, 13 make it clear that, although Abraham and Sarah are unaware of this, the three mysterious visitors (or one of them?) are in fact YHWH himself. This passage is thus another version of ch. 17, but expressed in a quite different, more circumstantial style, with a precise note of time and place. Abraham's treatment of the strangers is an example of the traditional customs of hospitality observed by tent-dwellers. The laughter of Sarah, like that of Abraham in 17:17, involves a play on words and is an expression of unbelief about the news that the visitors have brought. Sarah is firmly reminded that God has unlimited power and can bring about the impossible. Her denial that she laughed (v. 15) is caused by fear: she now dimly recognizes the identity of the speaker. The reference to Sodom in v. 16 introduces the theme that follows in the second half of the chapter and ch. 19. The passage is an admirable example of the high quality of Hebrew narrative art at its best.

(18:17-33) This passage is not based on an older folk-tale but is a discussion of a theological question of the utmost importance, that the author has himself composed in the form of a dialogue. The question, which is about God's justice (v. 25), was not, for the readers, a purely theoretical one, but one of immense *practical* importance, especially for those who had suffered, and were still suffering, the effects of the devastation of the Babylonian conquest of Judah in 587 BCE. It is raised in various forms in other OT books of a relatively late period, e.g. in Job, and Ezek 14:12-23. The fate of Sodom is here a paradigm of this much wider question.

The passage is remarkable in more than one respect. It begins (vv. 17-21) with the author's notion of YHWH's private thoughts: YHWH comes to a decision to inform Abraham of his intention—if the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah prove to be as wicked as they have been reported to be—to destroy them, so that Abraham, whom he has chosen, may not imitate their wickedness and so prove unworthy of the promise (cf. 17:1-2, where Abraham's righteousness appears to have been made a condition of the making of the covenant with him). A second outstanding feature of the passage is Abraham's boldness in rebuking YHWH: although he frequently shows awareness of his temerity (vv. 27, 30, 31, 32), he dares to remind YHWH of his duty, as universal judge, to

deal justly (v. 25)! His rebuke is reminiscent of the passionate speeches of Job. Equally remarkable is YHWH's readiness to listen to the rebuke and even to modify his intention. The precise accusation which Abraham makes is that in proposing to destroy the whole population of Sodom and Gomorrah YHWH intends to treat the righteous in the same way as the wicked (v. 25). He extracts from YHWH a promise that he will not do so (v. 26). The point appears to be not that YHWH fell short of his true nature but rather that he is shown to be a just God after all! There is no particular significance in the diminishing numbers of righteous persons for whose sake he will not destroy Sodom (vv. 28-32). The principle of justice towards individuals as against indiscriminate collective punishment has been established.

(19:1-29) This story is an episode in the life of Lot, who had chosen to live in the plain of Jordan, whose principal cities (unknown to archaeology) were Sodom and Gomorrah in the vicinity of the Dead Sea (13:10-13). But it is now also connected with ch. 18: the 'men' who visited Abraham (18:2) departed towards Sodom with the exception of YHWH himself, who remained to talk to Abraham (18:22). In v. 1 the other two, now called 'angels' or 'messengers' (*mal'ākīm*), who are clearly supernatural beings (v. 11), arrive in Sodom, presumably to investigate the reported wickedness of the inhabitants (it appears to be assumed that there are *no* righteous persons among them), where they find Lot sitting in the city gate. It is to be noted that there is no mention at all of Abraham in the main story: he appears only after the event (v. 27) and looks down on the catastrophe in the valley below. His absence may suggest that this was originally a story about an unnamed man (now identified with Abraham's nephew Lot) and the destruction of a city, which the author has incorporated into the story of Abraham. The reason for its inclusion is not obvious; however, it illustrates the consequences of grave sin against which Abraham has been warned. It should further be noted that the main story recounts only the fate of Sodom: Gomorrah is not mentioned until v. 24. But the two cities are regularly mentioned together in a number of passages elsewhere in the OT as examples of exemplary sin and consequent annihilation (e.g. Deut 29:22-4; 32:32; Isa 1:9-10; Jer 23:14).

It is strongly stressed in 19:4 that every male individual was involved in the homosexual attack intended against the two angels. This is no doubt to be seen as a justification of the subsequent annihilation of the whole populace; but the omission of any reference to the women of the city (or to the children) reflects at least a residuary notion of communal rather than of individual guilt. Lot's offer of his daughters (v. 8) also reflects a moral code, repulsive to the modern reader, which put the duty of hospitality above other ethical concerns. vv. 24, 28 attempt to describe the nature of the catastrophe that overwhelmed Sodom. That it was an earthquake that caused the release of combustible gases is a plausible guess; but—apart from the fact that no historical basis can be found for the story—it is not possible to be sure what the author had in mind. The city of Zoar (*ṣōʿār*) to which Lot was allowed to flee (vv. 18-23) actually existed in OT times (Isa 15:5; Jer 48:34). Like Sodom and Gomorrah, it lay in the valley, but was counted as belonging to Moab. Its name is here stated to be derived from a verb *ṣār* meaning to be small or insignificant;