

(God is Great,)

God is Good

worshipweekly.com/God-is-Good.html

There was good reason for the ditty sung at the dinner table. Repetition and remembering are important. One can argue good is better than love. Love is a feeling. Whether love is good or evil depends on who or what you love and how you express it. Good, is good. "God is love" is not in the Hebrew Bible. "I will make all my goodness pass before you" (God says to Moses when Moses asks to behold His presence), Exodus 33:19. Let that be a teaser...

Abraham

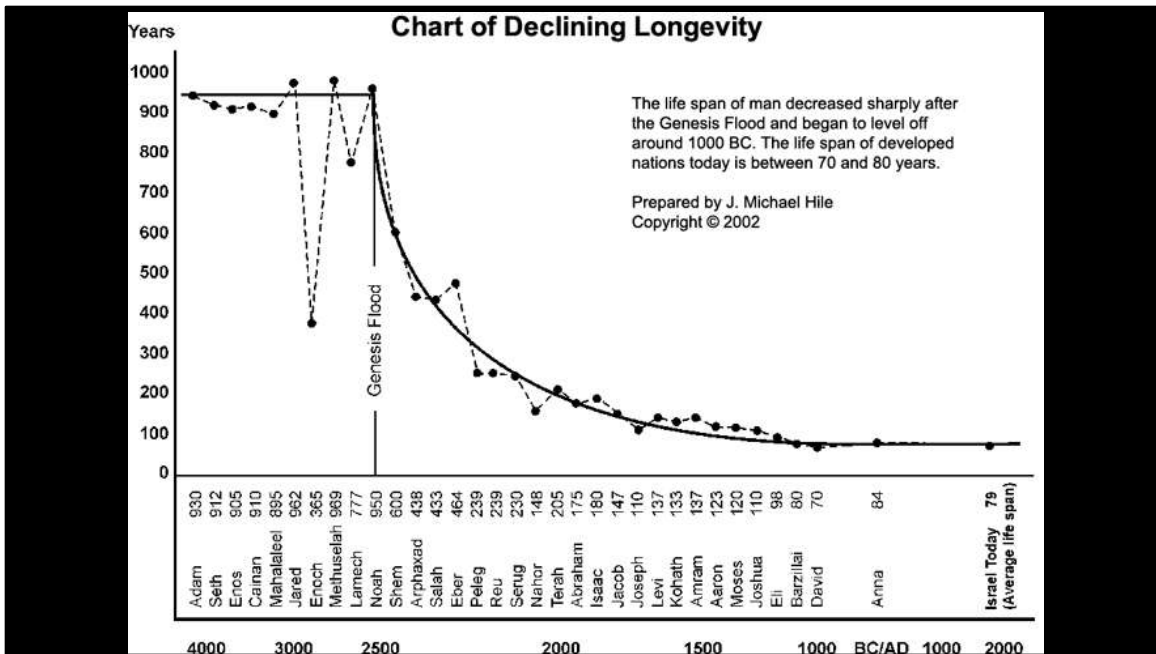
Genesis 12-20

Sources

**Rational Bible: Genesis, Dennis Prager
Dennis acknowledges all his sources in
the book**

Sefaria.org (Bible translation used here)

Only 2 volumes out so far. Exodus was published first because of the Ten Commandments, which, if everyone followed, we'd be practically devoid of human-caused suffering.



Q&A went well last week, I thought. Ask anything you want. If I don't happen to have an answer I'm comfortable with, I'll say so and do a little research, like for the question about longevity of lives following the Flood. This chart shows average lifespans, particularly for today. I also checked out maximums for the current era. There are only a handful of people that can be documented to have hit or passed 120 years of age, and then only by a couple years. There are people studying the question: is there ultimately a limit? Conclusions are mixed. We'll just have to wait and see.

12:1 The LORD said to Abram, “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.



We are not told why Abram was chosen, unlike Noah (righteous) and Moses (character). One possibility – Abram discovered God on his own and God responded. Two, God recognized Abram as a great man. Really doesn’t matter – God chose him, and all of history changed.

“Go forth” was his first test (Isaac sacrifice would be the last test).

“Will show/tell you”: same Hebrew words as the Isaac sacrifice instruction.

**12:2 I will bless those who
bless you And curse him
that curses you; And all
the families of the earth
Shall bless themselves by
you.”**



The notion of one nation being a blessing to all nations is a totally new concept. Jews are to be a blessing to all – number one purpose of Jews. Do Jews work within a world of no particular identities or do they strive to make a better world through particular national identities? The latter, as answered earlier by the Babel story.

**12:3 I will bless those who
bless you And curse him
that curses you; And all
the families of the earth
Shall bless themselves by
you.”**



This promise has held true. Nations that have favored the Jews have prospered, the U.S. being the best example, and vice versa: e.g. 1492 Spain, 19th century Germany, today's Arab world.

Just 3 verses in, God makes clear this isn't a blessing to just Abram and his family and descendants, but to ALL the world's families. This is repeated four times in this story alone. How will other nations/peoples bless themselves? By learning how to treat people well according to the laws and values of God.

12:5 Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed, and the persons that they had acquired in Haran; and they set out for the land of Canaan. When they arrived in the land of Canaan,



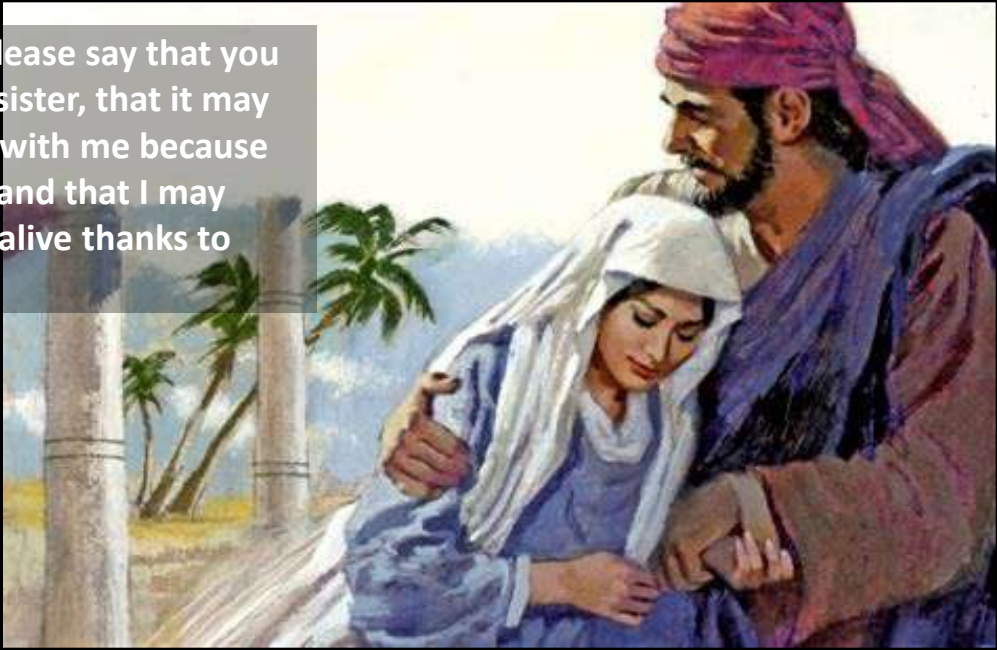
It is not insignificant that Abram is wealthy. Few great thinkers have been poor. It's OK to be wealthy. There are good and bad rich people and good and bad poor people. The Torah judges people by their character, not their wealth or lack of it.

12:11-12 As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, “I know what a beautiful woman you are. If the Egyptians see you, and think, ‘She is his wife,’ they will kill me and let you live.



God has already told Abram he would have many descendants, so why would he think Sarai might be killed? It is OK to have doubts. Doubts do not make one a non-believer, but rather a believer with doubts. Doubts are a part of faith. Makes for humility. Having no doubt makes one arrogant, and dangerous. The Egyptians were deemed quite capable of killing strangers and taking their wives, so the fear was understandable. Another of Abram’s tests will be how he treats strangers.

12:13 Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you.”



Some are critical of Abram for this: asking his wife to lie, and for exposing her to adultery. Many times we are called upon to balance moral choices. Would it have been better to tell the truth and be killed? Would Sarai have preferred that? And even at that, Sarai would likely have ended up in the Pharaoh's harem anyway. Here, the Torah neither praises nor condemns Abram's choice. In other Biblical references, lying is sometimes justified. Example, Samuel is instructed by God to lie (I Samuel 16:1-3). In this Samuel case, the Big Truth here is that murderers do not deserve the truth. Jeremiah similarly lies.

As for adultery, which it may appear Abram is asking Sarai to commit, she would not have been considered an adulterer if Pharaoh had forced her against her will. WW2, Irene Gut Opdyke agreed to become a mistress in order to keep 12 Jews hidden. It lasted for several months until she and the 12 Jews could escape. She was greatly honored by Jews and the Catholic Pope. We don't know what Sarai thought of this plan, but her being silent on the subject likely (rationally) means agreement.

13:8-9 Abram said to Lot, “Let there be no strife between you and me, between my herdsmen and yours, for we are kinsmen. Is not the whole land before you? Let us separate: if you go north, I will go south; and if you go south, I will go north.”



Abram was a man of peace, not a pacifist. Abram offered Lot (his nephew) whichever land he wanted, and accepted the other land. Here, he's avoiding conflict. But, soon Abram will choose to go to war (next chapter). Big Truth: Pacifism decreases peace. The basic question is not whether an action leads to peace, but rather will it lead to good or evil. If one does not resist evil, it's a temporary peace at best. But even that peace is merely a delusion as all it does is lead to more violence. In this case, though Abram let Lot choose, Abram ends up with the better deal.

13:13 So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward. Thus they parted from each other;



Lot chose the land of Sodom because he believed it would make him wealthy. It was a very fertile land (back then). He cared not what the inhabitants were like, or at least didn't inquire about that. Lot was like the 1930s business man who chose Nazi Germany as they were offering investors lucrative business opportunities. How many people have made moral compromises in hope of financial gain?

13:15 for I give all the land that you see to you and your offspring forever.



The land is given to Israel unconditionally. There is nothing in the world analogous to this. Even in the Koran this gift to Israel is told. This has lasted 3000 years. No other people has had sovereign nation on this land: 1010-586 BC, 530 BC to 70 AD, and 1948-present. How could one not marvel at the return after 2000 years? God places importance on land, the material. He created the material world and said it was good. The Torah is earth-bound, and heaven-bound. God placed man in a material world where he is to be good and holy. The material is important.

14:13 A fugitive brought the news to Abram the Hebrew, who was dwelling at the terebinths of Mamre the Amorite, kinsman of Eshkol and Aner, these being Abram's allies.

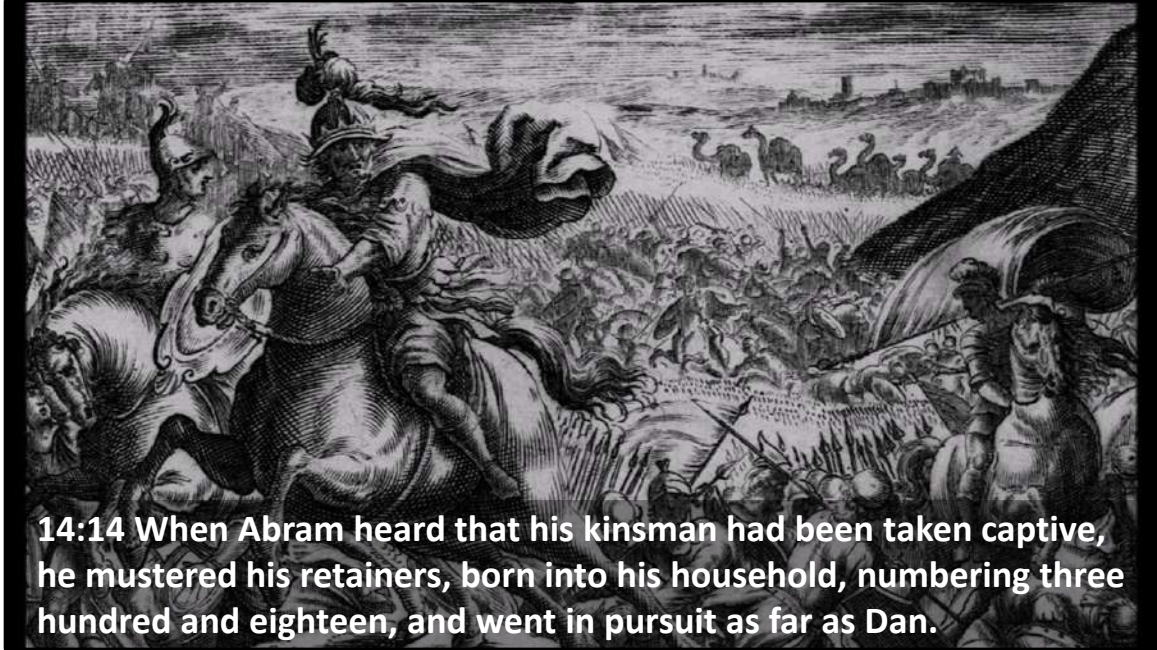
עברי

Ivri(e). Used here for the first time in the Bible. No one knows for sure what it means.

1. Maybe from Habiru, a nomadic people of Biblical times.
2. From avar, to pass or to wander.

What we know for sure is God's meaning: Abraham's descendants.

1. Maybe from Eber, one of Noah's grandson.
2. Ever, "beyond" as in the one from beyond. All the world is on one side (ever) and he on the other.



Abram goes to war to rescue Lot. "God will grant his people strength, God will bless his people with peace (Psalm 29).

Big Truth: Peace is maintained only as long as the decent are stronger than the indecent.

Pacifists ignore this truth. Bible-based people do not share this naivete.



14:23 I will not take so much as a thread or a sandal strap of what is yours; you shall not say, 'It is I who made Abram rich.'

Abram addressing King of Sodom who just helped Abram win back Lot and save Sodom. That Abram joined forces with a bad man illustrated another piece of wisdom: sometimes we are morally bound to fight alongside bad people to defeat worse people. It's a greater versus lesser evil question.



15:1 Some time later, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision. He said, “Fear not, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great.”

Vision: the Lord communicates in various ways. Sometimes a dream. Sometimes messengers. Only Moses was “face-to-face.”

The most frequent statement of God to man is “Do not fear.” Fear what? God himself could be a source of fear. So, too, other people. In the case of the latter, the biggest source of strength not to fear others is God. Those who trust in God know things will turn out for good, if not now in the afterlife.



Note New Testament reference. The Torah credits Abram with trusting God, not just believing he exists. God wants us to trust in him, not just believe he exists. The Bible views atheism as foolish. "Senseless people do not know, fools do not understand." (Psalms 92).

Faith AND Works. Many New Testament verses support this notion, too. Big in the Old: do justice, love goodness, and walk humbly with your God (Micah). Of course there are good non-believers and bad believers. But generally, individuals and societies that believe in the morally demanding God of the Bible, or at least the Ten Commandments, will behave better. The most important way to show your trust in God is to behave well toward your fellow human beings. My Change of Mind story... I remember being impressed when told with Jesus/Salvation, you would wind up in heaven along side murderers who believed. Some posited even murderers who did not believe. My hope is that is not true, per the Torah. What is the evil God says he will not forgive: doing evil in God's name (e.g. Islamic terrorists). This gives me some hope and much comfort.



15:15 As for you, You shall go to your fathers in peace; You shall be buried at a ripe old age.

God speaking to Abram. Or as put in other parts of the Torah, “gathered to one’s kin.” Here, Abram’s death is described as going to your fathers. The Torah never declares directly the existence of an afterlife, but it clearly implies it, like here. How else could one gather with their ancestors?

In the Torah, only Abram and Isaac are said to have died in peace at a ripe old age. To die like that is a blessing, and rare.



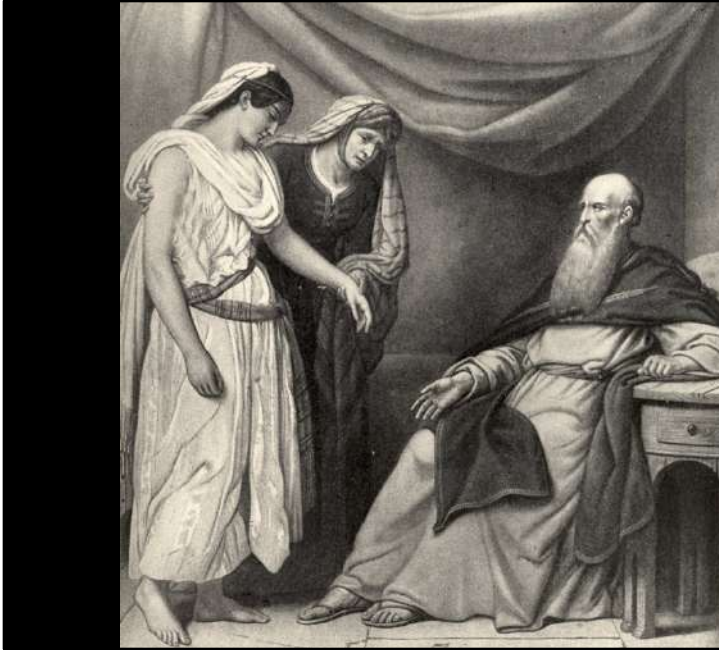
15:18 On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I assign this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates:

(2nd) Covenant of the Pieces, referring back to 15:9-10, how Abram was to know, animals brought and cut in two pieces.

Covenant with Noah was 1st.

This is the first covenant with the Jewish people (just named earlier in today's readings).

God's covenants were revolutionary. Other gods were capricious, erratic, unpredictable. God pledged to be dependable and trustworthy, thereby creating, for the first time, immutable spiritual and moral laws.



16:2 And Sarai said to Abram, “Look, the LORD has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall have a son through her.” And Abram heeded Sarai’s request.

The Torah tells us Hagar’s name, Sarai does not; the resentment and belittling has already begun

This was a common practice.

This was entirely Sarai’s idea. Not sure of Abram’s reaction, but based on his lack of enthusiasm, he wasn’t overly excited.



16:6 Abram said to Sarai, “Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right.” Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from her.

The Torah does not hide the flaws of its heroes.

A more accurate translation would be “tormented her”, it’s the same word used to describe Egyptian treatment of the Hebrews.

Was Abram playing the Happy Wife Happy Life game?

Life lesson... if you want to be noble (offer a son to Abram) be morally and spiritually disciplined for the results. Otherwise one is likely to descend from altruism to petty selfishness. It is not enough to have good intentions.



16:10 And the angel of the LORD said to her, “I will greatly increase your offspring, And they shall be too many to count.”

Many times in the Torah God promises descendants to men. Hagar is the only women in Genesis to receive such a promise. An Egyptian servant.

Moral greatness of the Torah, a non-Israelite woman receives what no Israelite woman received.

She ran off under Sarai’s tormenting, but God told her to return. And name her son Ishmael.

Abram thought Ishmael would be his heir (firstborn), but God told him no, Sarai would have a son, Isaac.

But God assured Abram that Ishmael would be blessed with a great nation as well.

After Isaac’s birth, things get much worse between Sarai and Hagar. Hagar and Ishmael leave. God saves them at the well in the wilderness.

Ishmael does indeed have many descendants. We will hear again of Ishmaelites in the Joseph story.



16:13 And she called the LORD who spoke to her, "You Are El-roi," by which she meant, "Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me!"

One last note about Hagar...

This is Hagar speaking. El-Roi = God sees me.

Hagar actually confers a name on God. No other character in the Old Testament does that.

17:1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am El Shaddai. Walk in My ways and be blameless.

אל שדי
(EL SHADDAI)

JHVH used only one time in Chapter 17, here along side El-Shaddai. Definition of El-Shaddai is not known, but this makes it clear that both refer to the same one God.

Derivations:

1. From shaddayim, breasts, referring to a feminine quality. After all, half the population is female.
2. Sheh-dai = it is enough/sufficient, God is the Sufficient One.
3. Blameless comes from tamin, same word used to describe Noah, "without blemish."

17:5 And you shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations.

17:7 I will maintain My covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and to your offspring to come.



ABRAHAM

A name change is huge.. Like a new Catholic Pope, for instance. Upon conversion to Judaism, one gets a new name. Here, it's a sign that something big is about to happen. Avraham, av is father and hamon is many – Father of Many.”

God's task is to keep the Jews alive on the world.

The Jews' task is to keep knowledge of God alive in the world.

It must be admitted that neither party has done a great job. God has kept Jews alive, barley, through all kinds of slaughter, and the Jews have not done a whole lot over the last 2000 years to spread the word. To be fair, it can be hard to worry about other things when you have to spend so much effort surviving.

But, if the Jews make the world good, they will be blessed by not being killed, nor will others be killed.

17:10 Such shall be the covenant between Me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised.



This has been an argument. Many countries have tried to outlaw this practice using all kinds of reasons. Prager holds to these points:

It is both medically beneficial and Jewishly necessary.

It is not mutilation. Any form of female circumcision would be mutilation.

No reduction in sexual pleasure.

Connection to thousands of years of Judaism.

Even Abraham did it at 99.



17:15-16 And God said to Abraham, “As for your wife Sarai, you shall not call her Sarai, but her name shall be Sarah. I will bless her; indeed, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she shall give rise to nations; rulers of peoples shall issue from her.”

The only woman renamed in the Torah. Finally, God names Sarah as the mother of the Israelite people. Had God made this known to her earlier, would she have come up with the idea of Abraham having a child with Hagar? Perhaps not.



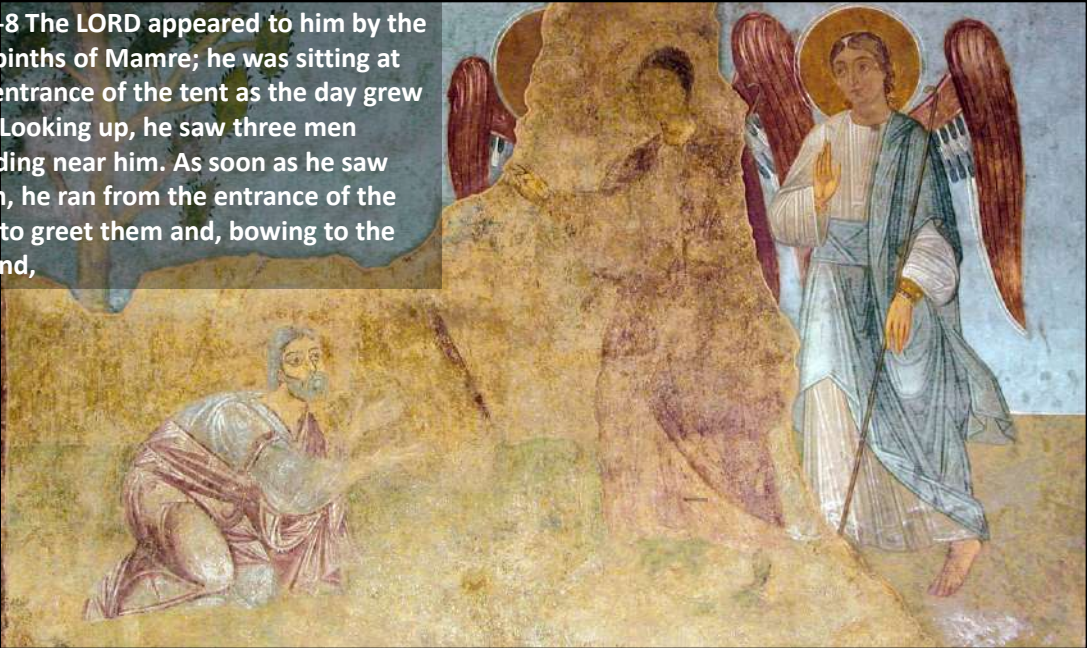
17:17 Abraham threw himself on his face and laughed, as he said to himself, “Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?”

This is how intimate Abraham’s and God’s relationship was. When God is real to us, we should be able to laugh with, cry with, get angry with God.

The Jews became a nation through a miracle.

Many people today do not believe in miracles. Nothing more than suspension of natural law. If one denies the existence of God, then natural laws can never be suspended. But then how do you explain the existence of anything. On the other hand, if God created all from nothing, what’s a little suspension of natural law?

18:1-8 The LORD appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot. Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground,



Normally when God appears, he speaks. Nothing is said here. Likeliest explanation: the strangers are God's messengers.

Terebinths are native trees.

This chapter shows Abraham at his greatest. Kindness to these strangers, humility. Gradually we learn of Abraham's qualities.

Bowing was a common practice for greeting.



18:5 And let me fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves; then go on—seeing that you have come your servant’s way.” They replied, “Do as you have said.”

Abraham did a great deal to make these strangers feel welcome and comfortable.



18:8 He took curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared and set these before them; and he waited on them under the tree as they ate.

Contents of the meal is interesting. Abram served milk and meat, a violation of later Jewish law. Thinkers have argued about this, but it really isn't that complicated. That food law had not yet been stated, so there was nothing to violate.

In one way, describing actions that would LATER violate Jewish law, is a confirmation of the veracity and age of the Torah.



18:9 They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he replied, “There, in the tent.”

Why does Abraham not ask how they know Sarah’s name? Perhaps he already suspects they are divine messengers.

In most Middle Eastern societies, men do not talk with another man’s wife.

But they asked her whereabouts to make sure she could hear what they would say.

They say Sarah will have a son. And Sarah overhears.

Abraham does not share this news with Sarah. Too shocking? God wanted only him to know (god did not say to tell Sarah). Maybe he himself was a bit skeptical and didn’t want to raise hopes.

One of the verses here states that Sarah was in menopause. Makes it clear this was divine intervention, nothing natural.



18:12-13 And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?” Then the LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?’

Maybe this was one of the messengers speaking for God. It’s also possible it’s a continuation of verse 1.

When God reported her reaction to Abraham, He left out the “he is an old man” part. Permissible deviation from truth to spare a person unnecessary hurt or to keep peace in the house.

“If all men knew what others say about them, there would not be four friends in the world.” Blaise Pascal, philosopher.

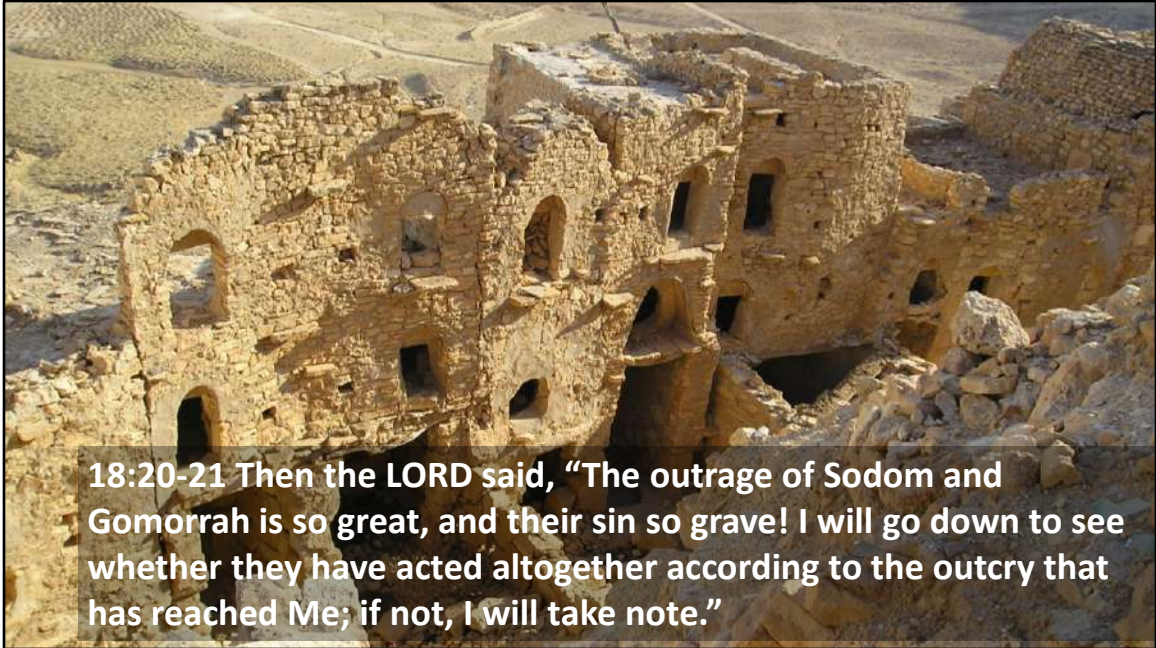
Sarah lied saying she did not laugh. God does not punish her for the lie or the laugh. He simply straightened her out saying, “you did laugh.”

God was teaching Sarah: while there are many things in this world you can get away with, lying to God is not one of them.



18:19 For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is just and right, in order that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him.”

God explains what “Way of the Lord” means – doing what is right and just. The Torah revealed ethical monotheism, and this verse summarizes that: God is moral, God expects moral behavior, and God will judge according to His moral laws.



A moral God. God took a final look to make sure. Lesson 1: need to establish the truth, the facts, before passing judgement.

Hearsay is not good enough. Unfortunately, this is usually not normal human behavior. We tend to jump to judgement. Lesson 2: God judges all according to His universal laws. This was new in the day. God’s morality is stated and predictable.

Lesson 3: God cares more about how we treat other people than He does about how we trip Him; another enormous difference. This has been the source of much Jewish hatred. “How dare your God tell us what is moral for all of us?”

18:23-24 Abraham came forward and said, “Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? What if there should be fifty innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it?”



1. Why didn't Abraham ask for God to grant an opportunity for Sodom to repent? Perhaps... Both understood that repentance is only possible when the evil doer knows what he's doing is evil. It's fairly clear ALL the people of Sodom had no idea of good and evil. Like Islamic terrorists of today; they think they're doing good. They would not understand a call to repentance. "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil, who present darkness as light and light as darkness." Isaiah. Don't turn things upside down. Today Isaiah might say, "Woe to those you call looting and arson and rioting good, and calls trying to keep your business alive bad."
2. Abraham argues with God about saving Sodom and Gomorrah. Dickers on the number of good people needed to be found, from 50 to 10.

18:32 And he said, "Let not my Lord be angry if I speak but this last time: What if ten should be found there?" And He answered, "I will not destroy, for the sake of the ten."

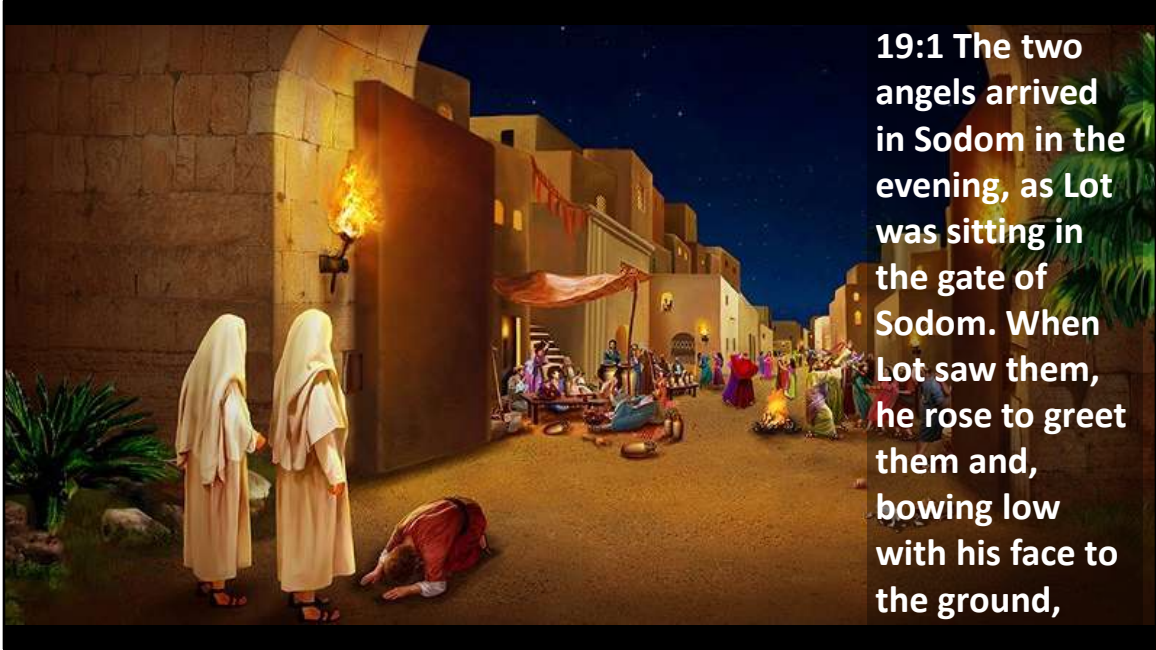


Abraham stops at ten. There has to be some minimum, a quorum so to speak. And every one of those must do as much good as they can.

On the other hand, a sole person can do far more evil than most any size group of good persons can do good.

Oswald (Prager might mark the Kennedy assassination as "the beginning of the Fall of the USA"). Other examples: Hitler. Lenin. Stalin. Mao Tse-Tung. Pol-Pot. Each may not have been working alone, but it could be argued that without these men in control, things would not have gone so far south.

But small groups can do good: our Founding Fathers, those who brought about the abolishment of slavery, dissidents in the USSR. Even the moral impact of a tiny group of people known as the Jews.



Previously these messengers of God were called men, now called angels/messengers. Angels are generally wingless (surprise!), God-sent messengers. How did Lot perceive them, we do not know. He treated them well. That could be because he recognized something special about them, or that he had been taught well by how Abraham treated strangers.

19:2-3 The two angels arrived in Sodom in the evening, as Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to greet them and, bowing low with his face to the ground, he said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house to spend the night, and bathe your feet; then you may be on your way early." But they said, "No, we will spend the night in the square."



Lot's suggestion for them to leave early may have to do with his fear of what the Sodomites would do to them. This suggests he did not think they had supernatural powers.

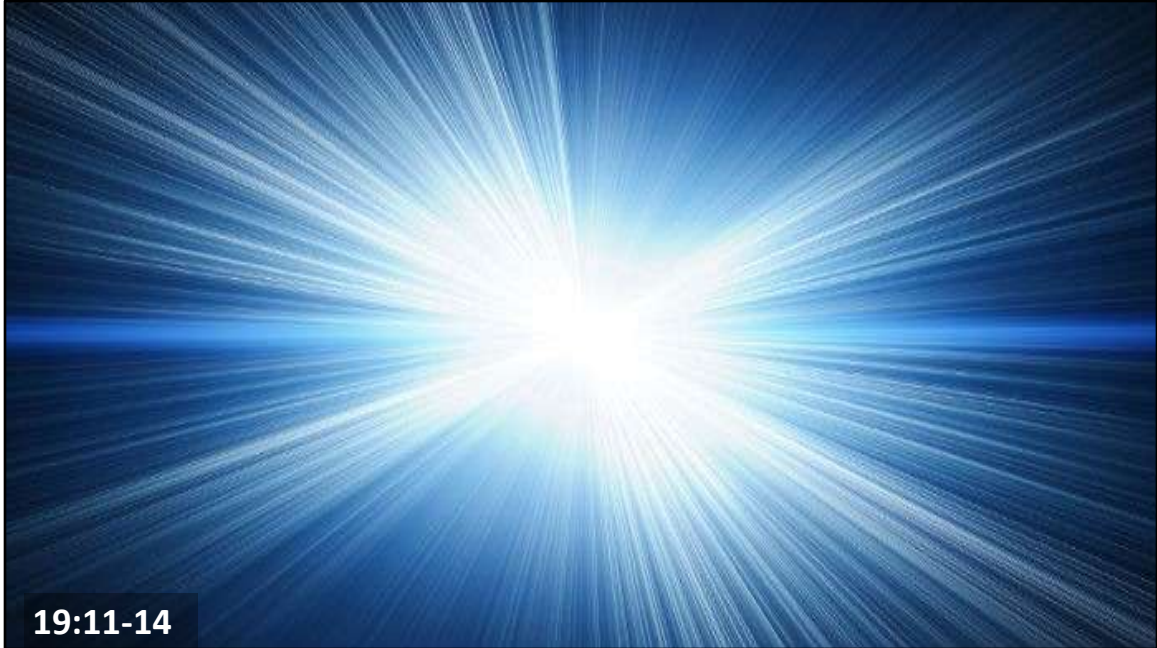
This is the first time unleavened bread, matzah, is mentioned in the Torah. Both here and in the Exodus, matzah is used because there is no time for the bread to rise.



In the verses, the townspeople surround Lot's house so as to have sexual relations with the strangers. (The "knew" verb is used.) Apparently, this was common in Sodom. While homosexual rape is the evil identified here, Ezekiel makes it clear that many other evils were practiced as well in Sodom.

Lot offers his virgin daughters to dissuade the mob from raping the strangers. Treating Lot as lightly as possible here, he may have understood they would not accept the offer and was just buying time. This is also proof of the sex intent of the townspeople (clearly what Lot thought).

Lot is a stranger in Sodom, and Sodom feels no moral obligation to him.



The Sodomites were struck with a bright light by the angels/messengers.
The angels ask who else in Lots family there is to save. He did have other children besides the two he offered as virgins.
The angels make it clear they are about to destroy the city.
So Lot goes and tries to get his sons-in-law to leave with him. They did not buy it.

19:15-16 As dawn broke, the angels urged Lot on, saying, “Up, take your wife and your two remaining daughters, lest you be swept away because of the iniquity of the city.” Still he delayed. So the men seized his hand, and the hands of his wife and his two daughters—in the LORD’s mercy on him—and brought him out and left him outside the city.



In the morning Lot left with his immediate family including the two virgin daughters.

1. When people do wrong and suffer as a result, it is their sin, not their punishment, that brought on their suffering.
2. Lot had to be dragged out. It’s hard to leave your homeland. This is human nature. It’s just as hard to leave a belief or position you hold, however wrong.
3. Unlike Noah who deserved to be saved, God saved Lot because he pitied him. Lot had the good fortune to be Abraham’s nephew, “God was mindful of Abraham” when dealing with Lot. Unrighteous people may be spared by the accrued righteousness of good people. Jewish phrase, Zechut-avot, meaning “merit of the patriarchs.” Most of us treat people a little better if we respect their parents, grandparents, or the like. The good we do and goodwill we engender can end up a being a blessing to our children and grandchildren.



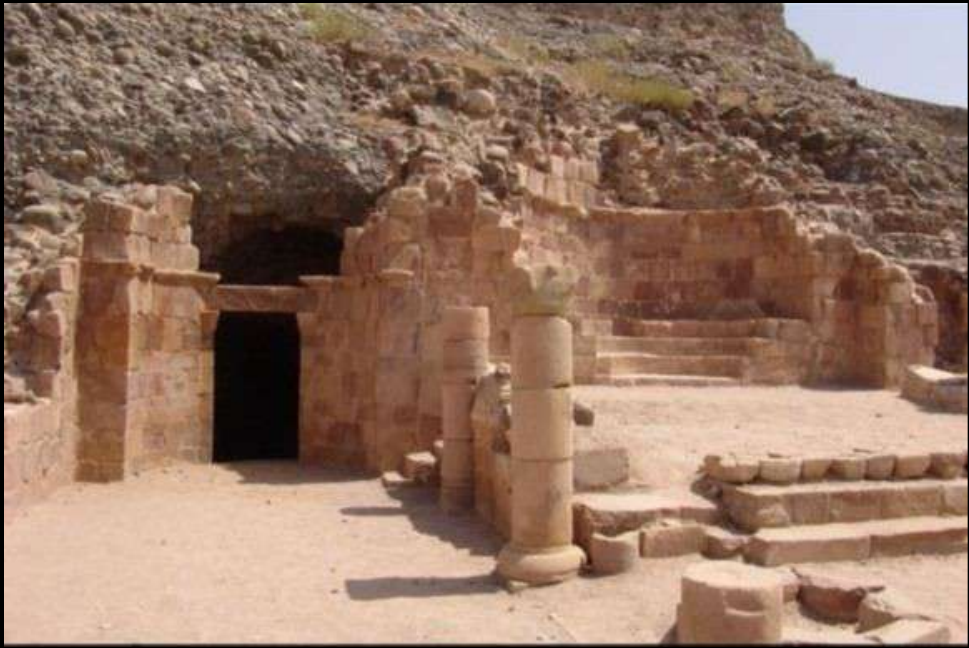
“Fire and brimstone.” This one verse says God is the source of the destruction, twice. Emphasizes God, not nature, not pagan gods, not enemies, etc. Many people have tried to discover exactly how the cities were destroyed, but hopefully as we are learning, the how is not nearly as important as the why. God hates evil.



19:26 Lot's wife looked back, and she thereupon turned into a pillar of salt.

Literally, "Lot's wife looked from behind them." Maybe hoping against hope that her other daughters had left as well. Or maybe deliberately "rejoining" her daughters just killed in the destruction. Such is the power of the maternal bond.

19:29-38



Lot and his two daughters headed toward Zoar but ended up in the nearby hills. He was all-too familiar with how strangers might be treated “in town.”

Though there were clearly people still alive after the destruction of Sodom, Lot’s daughters believed the only way to have children was with their father. So they plied him with alcohol and slept with him. Stories like this are a warning against drunkenness. Jewish law itself not only doesn’t forbid alcohol, it actually requires it on the sabbath and other holy days. Hebrew phrase, “respect it and suspect it.”

A second lesson may be... what goes around comes around. Lot offered his daughters as sexual favors and now he is taken advantage of sexually.

In any case, from these two interactions descended the Moabites and the Ammonites.

Next session: September 1st, 6pm PDT

Isaac and Jacob

Genesis 21-36